

LETTERS
TO
PEOPLE
WHO
CARE

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Edited by Arpista Editing. Errors that remain are mine.

This book was written in the summer of 2016.

For A,
B,
C,
and D.

Only when a new passion for moral progress was fused with modern scientific skepticism did the typical state of the modern mind emerge.

Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*

1.

Swamps full of alligators, rotting vegetation, flies, mosquitos, a road through the swamp, made of wood, I am walking, as I will for many more hours, on my bloody feet.

Is this the end? It's a bright, sunny day, and a breeze blows hot, humid air on my sunburned, windchapped face. I don't know if this is the end, and I don't need to know if it is the

end. I will never know if it is the end, and I will never know if I have found my city for forever, or if I've only found it for a while, and I will never know if my body will last, or if it will only last a while, or be replaced.

I do know that my feet are bloody from walking, so I pause to try to get some relief, by adjusting the bandages which are my socks and shoes.

It's been 15 days that I've been walking from my old city to my new city. I've got provisions enough to last another month, I think, if I eat at the rate that I eat.

I've met a few souls on this road, which goes from the north to the south. I've seen some people with their own backpacks on, with enough provisions to make it where I came from. I tell them that, and they're pleased. I try to be encouraging, at least, when I have good reason to be encouraging.

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It's nighttime now, and the temperature has decreased by about 10 degrees. I've settled in one of the turnouts on this wooden road, a platform for travelers to take a break. I've settled in for the night, and I'm looking up at the stars, smelling the swamp smells, and fully knowing that I'm being eaten by mosquitos, as much now as I was any day last week. There is misery on this journey, but that is just as well. I can trust this misery as much or even more than I could trust the comforts of home.

Earlier today, I met a traveler going my way toward the new city in the south. He was a thick, fat, pudgy man with sober eyes. He must have really needed to go to the new city, because his feet were even bloodier than mine. He talked to me for a bit about what he was going to do when he got there. He was going to buy a house, out on the edge of the city, and plant a garden. And he was going to grow things in that garden that would be so fresh and delicious that he would be a happy man. He would lose weight, from all the fiber in the vegetables and fruit he was going to grow. This is what he thought about as he walked. He thought about it as though he already had it, which was admirable, but in reality he didn't have it. I asked him about that, what if the soil out there is no good for gardens? And he said, I know there will be good soil out there. And I said, How do you know that? And he said I don't know it, but I trust it. I trust that garden right now, and it's how I walk. I trust it already. I could be wrong. I could be betrayed. And I am okay with that. But I already trust it.

I said to him, Well, I hope that you are not betrayed. He said, I hope you are not betrayed either, in the city of the south.

And then we exchanged information about where we would be living in the new city, and it turned out that he was willing to settle just about anywhere in the periphery, and get a job only if he couldn't live off his garden. And I said that I was going to live at EL7 Street, because that's where the property would be, the property that I inherited. I was going to inherit something in this new city, I didn't know

quite what, perhaps a whole building. EL7 was in a neighborhood that was separated only by a deep ravine from the very center of the city — according to the maps.

Whatever doubts or knowledge I might have had, I was on the road and my feet were bloody.

The man smiled to hear that. Good, he said, Good, you are on the road. I'm glad to hear it.

And we talked on for a bit, and he parted saying, Don't let the flies hit your eyes!

What a perfect thing for him to say, as we traveled through the swamp. And though I'm a skinny man, this thick, fat, very sweaty man was walking faster than me at this point, this man, who, like me, was both on a contracting and expanding arc of life.

I'm lying on the road, on my back, with the wood telling me to stay awake a while longer, keep thinking about things, but I'm very tired from all my walking and my sunburns and mosquito bites, so I close my eyes and try to sleep. And I can hear little fishes swimming through the channel underneath the turnout, and I breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide.

I don't know why I didn't keep a diary before on my trip, but I'm starting now, I'm writing this with my own hand in a notebook, by the light of a flashlight. My first entry. — Now I will really try to sleep.

2.

It's strange that I don't notice what goes on in the swamp.

I've seen some alligators. Them I notice. But I look at the swamp all day long and the little trees don't mean much to me, the little channels and rushes also don't mean much to me. I wonder if I was a little fish swimming around here, or an alligator, would I relate to this all differently? I'm trying to figure this out because I imagine that living in a city, for a human, is like living in a swamp, for an alligator or a fish. If the fish can't find meaning here, maybe I'll be able to, in the city where I'm going, because perhaps I'm different from them, I'm more easily satisfied — but really, between a fish and a man, who's more likely to be satisfied with life? I imagine that fish simply live in the moment, until the moment of fear when they smell an alligator. And either the alligator eats them or it doesn't.

I get myself in a bit of anxiety about this city which may disappoint me in every way possible: even if I get what I want, it could turn into ash in my mouth because of the meaninglessness of things. All the features of the city could fail to be home, they could just be a field of rushes, channels that defy full consciousness. How terrible for me to suffer that, I must have compassion on myself in advance, I must be in solidarity with my future self, and bear the burden now. Yet, though my mind gets caught up in such elaborate and raw-winded suffering, I find my feet, bloody and steady, walking further south, through this swamp which was not made for human habitation.

I met a traveler today, a woman with a large dog. She was at least as sunburned as I am. She was walking north, and she stopped in a turnout where I was eating and resting.

What ho! she said. I see thou hast settled in with some bread and peanut butter. (I could already tell a lot about her from her accent, from the south of the new city.) Hast thou any food for my dog, any scraps or inedible things? And I had to sadly tell her No, I only have enough food for myself, but maybe you could try catching a fish some night? And she said, Thou hast spoken wisely. Hast thou any bait?

And I said, Sadly, no. I don't have any bait. And she said, O man, thou hast spoken honestly with me. Please, accept this gift.

And she gave me a small embroidered handkerchief, one of the Southern City handicrafts, with which the poor women make their living.

I thanked her and offered her a blessing, and such a kind, sweet woman as she, I knew, would suffer greatly in the city of the north, so I told her plainly that she should learn to speak a different way, if she could, but if she could not, she should settle in the Southern Quarter, to be among her own people. I gave her an address of a Southern friend of mine, telling her to see him when she got into town, that he could direct her to some trustworthy places to live.

How do I know that thou art not lying to me? she said.

This question comes up a lot and it doesn't offend me anymore. I think it has something to do with the scars on my demeanor from years of self-doubt.

You have my word, I said, as the one who told you to go fishing for your dog. And she said, Anyone could have said that, could not thou be a trick, a trapping man? And I didn't know what to say to her. But then I said, When you get there, see if you can make it on your own. If you can make it on your own, then you need no one else. But if you are in need, but before you become desperate, come by Estroudiant Way, to the Plaza, where my Southern friend sells his wife's handicrafts. And just approach him as a customer. You can trust him as a seller of handicrafts, if not as someone to settle you into a community.

But when will I know when it is safe to trust him more, more than as a seller of handicrafts?

I don't know, I said with great sadness, Perhaps you will never know, and never can know.

And she took pity on me and gave me a hug. Thou wilt understand someday, she said to comfort me.

And then it was time for me to go south, and her to go north, and we split ways, and I could hear her marveling quietly but aloud about Fishing, who could of such a thing have conceived?

And then I continued on, not seeing anyone until I reached Thorson's Rock, a great granite monolith, towering 50 feet

high, on which, all around the base, people in boats had left graffiti, to the height that they could reach. There was a turnout there, and there I saw a man fishing, imagine that. I wanted to make a trade with him for at least a hook, so that I could offer it to people I met, remembering the Southern City woman, but I didn't have anything he needed, so I kept going.

Then I came upon a work crew, repairing a piece of the walkway that had been struck by lightning. It made me think. Out here, in the heat and the humidity, of course there would be thunderstorms. I asked the work crew if anyone had been hit by lightning, and they said, Yes, it has happened before, but, you're almost more likely to get struck by lightning than to be struck by lightning! And that burst of humor cheered me up.

I found some shoes as I went south. I was unsure if I should wear them or not. There was probably a reason why they were abandoned. I wouldn't want to infect my feet, my bloody footsores trapped in such a germ-breeding environment as a dank, damp, even rotten shoe. So I left them right there on the walkway, wondering if anyone else would see fit to put their feet in them.

I'm lying back on the wood now, it's not yet dark, but I'm writing in my diary now, rather than later, to save flashlight batteries. I think after this relaxing break, I'll try to make it to another turnout or two. I have to save my strength, because tomorrow, I'm going to have to get through a passage where the winds come down the Grand Valley (of which this vast swamp is the marsh and estuary), from the

Grand Escarpment, these adiabatically hot winds which gust and require caution, and attendance to the handrails, and attention and stamina. My thoughts turn to the day to come, but I am not afraid, because what's the point of fear? At this point, I'm not turning back. My fears have receded like a gumline from deciding, in various situations, to not turn back.

3.

I was awoken this morning by a man shaking me. I was a bit frightened by his face, which was scared, his eyes big. He had scars on his face. It did not seem as though he was going to hurt me, but there was something lost, wild and desperate about him. He asked me if he could use my radio. I told him I didn't have a radio, but I did have a cell phone. No, no, that's no good, cell phones are no good out here, he said. Well, I said, I do have this, which might do — I got out my shortwave transceiver — But all it can do is emergencies.

That's fine, he said, It's an emergency. I gave him the transceiver and watched him. I wanted to make sure I got it back at the end of his conversation. He kept edging by the handrail and looking away, and telling me not to get too close. He spoke low, and I could only tell what he was saying some of the time. He was talking to a woman, it seemed. I was uneasy about him having my radio, and I followed him as he edged along the walkway, and then he finally concluded the conversation and gave me back my radio. Thanks, he said.

At that moment, an angry man came into view with a gun.

He grabbed the man who had made the call on my radio, and pointed the gun in his face. He said something about What you did. I didn't understand the situation, and didn't see how I could help, so I kept walking. Once I was out of view, I started thinking, Why am I not back there? Is my real journey to keep walking? Real life was back there. Maybe I could have done something. I could have been a witness.

But, the purpose of waking up in the morning, the reason for going to sleep last night, was not to be part of the lives of those men.

I wondered when the winds would start to blow on me. I knew that the chances of the winds blowing today were not 100%. In addition to the emergency bands, my radio could sometimes get weather bands, but not reliably, and after the man used it, it didn't have a lot of battery left. I thought it would take too long to find the right band and listen long enough to get the specific data. I decided to assume that the winds would definitely come, and I continued along the walkway.

I was surprised to see a sign saying Caution Gusty Winds, next 20 miles. I was surprised because this was the first sign on the way through the swamp, not even Thorson's Rock had a celebratory sign. How helpful, to have this sign. And soon enough, I felt the wind coming at me, somehow both dry and humid, and 100% hot.

I walked with my legs wide, and held onto the handrail with my right hand. The gusts tended to come in my face,

unfortunately, but also at an angle that pushed me against the rail. I squinted against the wind, or looked down.

The wind comes through an opening in the side of the Grand Escarpment, comes from air high up in the mountains away to the east, and as it descends, it compresses and heats — adiabatic heating — and dries out. It comes through the opening, at an angle to the Grand Valley, and so it is that it hits me at precisely the angle that it does. I was glad that I had learned that much in geography class, that the teacher hadn't mistaught the concepts, that it was even possible to make the connection that something as wild and strange as the wind could have a pattern to it.

As I made my way, I felt a kind of wildness and gustiness inside of me. It was like the wind was entering into me, and giving me the heart I needed to get through the wind, it was giving me steel. I found myself rejoicing as I walked, as the wind blew into my sunburned face. I blessed it with curses, this rough friend, who was here to try to kill me. I realized, as I reflected on this, that I *liked* being killed — so, maybe I would even like dying. This thought cheered me up continually, although I still held onto the rail, still kept my feet wide apart, exactly so that I would not fall into the swamp and potentially drown.

I remembered the man who had used my radio. I felt for him, somehow I felt in his direction, that he would be okay.

The man with the gun was a different matter. I didn't know his deal, and he walked into my life with all the power. But though I didn't know all of the deal of the man who used my radio, I did know that he genuinely was afraid. I could see

that in his face, in his manner. He was vulnerable, he was a suffering man, although he might have been capable of murder.

At some point I saw birds trying to take off and fly and then they got caught in the gusts. There was a whole flock of crows, a whole murder, I guess you could say, that got split by a gust, but then they came back together, cawing to each other in their usual in-your-face way. How fun it would be to be a crow, I reflected. You could get away with practically anything. Being a crow would be like being a criminal genius in a gang made up of criminal geniuses, who were also your best friends.

I tried to remember, were crows native to swamps? If they weren't, then maybe this was a sign that I was getting close to town. Then again, I remembered a fact passed on to me by the newspaper science section, that crows can travel 200 miles a day.

All in all, there wasn't too much exciting that happened as I walked through the wind. Nothing terribly bad happened. I didn't fall in the swamp, and I didn't even drop any food in as I stopped to eat, braced against the handrails of a turnout.

Now I'm through the gusty portion, and I'm good and tired. It's really more than I would have liked to have done in one day, but I didn't want to try to sleep with the gusts going, as they can all night long. I think I won't have too much trouble getting to sleep tonight.

4.

It's been cloudy today, and I've been wondering again about being hit by lightning. As I think about it, I wonder if the thing to do is to find a spot of land down in the swamp and get down there under the walkway, by the pilings. Yes, that's probably the smart thing to do. But there's no thunder today.

I'm getting low on water, so I'm glad to see the man with the water wagon come. He drags a small wagon, a four-wheeled cart, with two large containers of water with spigots. For an exorbitant but entirely reasonable fee, I purchase a refill on all my water bottles. Somehow it feels good to be weighed down in that way.

I'm getting tired of walking. I know there's a fair way to go. I'm looking forward to at least getting out of the swamp, which should take tomorrow and maybe half the next day, depending on how much progress I can make.

I start to sing to myself, which interestingly enough I haven't done so far on this trip. I mostly sing the things that tended to get stuck in my head when I was an adolescent. But these have a certain flatness to them, and eventually I find myself repeating the few old folk songs I know, like "Blue Eyes Yonder" and "The Crying Rose of Yvaunt Ylos". I don't know all the words, but I do know the melodies, as best as I can.

I keep thinking about the reason I'm going to the new city in the south: my uncle died not long ago and it was discovered in his will that I was to inherit some property of his, which turned out to be on the part of the map near the center of the city, but separated by a deep ravine. EL7 Street. The map was a bit out of date, so it made me wonder if EL7 Street really did have that undeveloped land close to the ravine anymore or not. I wondered if that ravine was full of people trying to make the best of life, living in tents or lean-tos or even tunnels in the side of the ravine. I wondered what happened when the thunderstorms came. What was the new city like? Was it growing or shrinking? People gave conflicting answers, up north. Of course we knew plenty of travelers, emigrants, immigrants, Burners, we called them, from their baked faces, and yet it was easy not to think about the new city, to think only of the ordinary things. We might listen to a radio program about the new city once in a while, but the lessons wouldn't stick. We'd only get the cartoon version of life there. We would know about the Southern City accent, and a little bit about the cultural doings, but I knew that I did not know, and I was interested to begin the process of finding out.

My mind was already planted with one foot in the new city, and the other in the present moment. I was simultaneously walking on the walkway in the humidity and with my whole being in a potentiality, or a beyond, a pastness, as in "past the horizon", something that was fully substantial to me and yet, as a beyond, could never be seen with my eyes. This sounds complicated, but no matter: I did what I had to to get my mind to be in the groove, to be as devoted as my feet to the task of moving through the moments toward this city,

thousands of feet up the Escarpment, a place which I did know was cooler and drier, a place about a mile above sea level, a place where I had some sort of property awaiting me. It did not suffice to think about the property, I had to lean into the beyond to fully endure, to fully lean into the future. I had to keep my eyes far ahead, looking out onto the hypnotically straight walkway, and as I did so I sang and tapped my hand on the handrail and I was becoming a new creation.

And then someone came up to me, another Southern City woman. She was beautiful, as it is said that they all are (Is that true? I wonder) and she called out in greeting to me. 'Swounds, I haven't seen anyone all day! she said. And I waved to her and said Hello! and continued on my way.

I thought about this strange new custom of greeting people. When I was an adolescent, no one would have greeted another person in the street. But now, more and more, people were greeting each other. We could have greeted each other all along, but it seems no one thought of it. I wasn't entirely comfortable greeting people myself, taking the initiative, but it seemed as though I was becoming used to engaging in greeting activities. I wondered if people greeted each other more in the new city. Was this something that was done more in the Southern City neighborhood? I tried to remember if I'd seen it done by Southerners back home.

I am lying back against my backpack, trying not to think too hard about my many mosquito bites, writing this down in my notebook. I hope it doesn't rain on me in my sleep. I have

cranked my transceiver for a while and am listening to the weather band, hoping to hear what they predict. Yet, after all that happened today, even though it's not long after dark, I think I may just turn in without staying up for the forecast, which may not come, after all. Well, it's good night for the time being, dear diary.

5.

It was a long day, but I can see on the horizon the end of the swamp. I've been able to see the Grand Escarpment for some time, but it seemed to hardly grow closer each day.

But now I can make out the lower reaches, and see even early this morning the fires of the people who must have got up early to cook their meals, before departing with their water wagons and their wood for walkway-repairing. I think by the end of today I'll be close to the little village at the base of the escarpment. I'm writing this note as I digest my lunch.

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And now it is evening and I think if I stay up a bit into the night, use my flashlight, I can make it. I met a man headed north who told me something of that nature, that there was a just a few hours' walking left. So I'm pretty sure I'll make it.

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And here I am, finally out of the swamp, in the rocks of the Escarpment, renting a canvas tarp to make a lean-to (at a non-exorbitant, very reasonable price). And I feel a feeling of gratitude inside me, which I suppose might be to Life itself, or to the people who have gone before me. I'm not sure quite what Life means, but Life certainly speaks to me.

I'd be willing to guess that there's something behind it. Or perhaps there is not. Life is real as Life, I know that much.

And I keep living it, I keep consuming it as though I'm a child, consuming my parents' attention as though there was an infinite amount of it.

I've purchased several necessary things and traded away some unnecessary things. I'll use just a little bit of flashlight battery to finish writing this entry and then I'm going to sleep.

6.

I woke up this morning feeling very rested, but after a few hours I felt a kind of heaviness come over me as I walked — that's not the right way to describe it, but I can't think how to explain it better. I was walking along a path that ran along the swamp's edge of the Escarpment, headed toward the beginning of the switchbacks.

And right now I'm taking a break after who knows how many switchbacks. It reminds me of the waves of the ocean, how one will come and then another, and they leave no trace.

I'm in the middle of this uncountable multitude, and it's a

strange place to be. I'm disconnected from time, half-disconnected.

It's nice to look back on the swamp. I can still make out the walkway, still see the turnouts, I can even see a few people ever-so-slowly make their way north or south. I can see the smoke and the fires of the village down below. And then I decide I've seen enough, and I get up, saddle my back with my backpack, and plod along, up and back and forth.

I wonder if I will ever get to the top. The map I bought shows the individual switchbacks, but I lost count a long time ago. It's strange, but when you climb a mountain, you often have no idea how close you are to the top until suddenly the path levels out and there you are. There is some small part of me that says "You will never reach the top." And another part that replies "I will walk for all eternity." These two hold each other at bay. And the rest of me doesn't really know anything either, it just focuses on breathing, and thinking about whatever it is that I think about, whether it be people I've known in my past, or about the tan soil that I'm kicking up to dust, or about whatever else. At one point I think, What if everything will cease to exist around the next curve, around that rock? (I'm being fanciful.) And then I get around the boulder and I see that there is another stretch of switchback, leading to another bouldered corner. The Escarpment provides new switchback just as I'm about to run out of old switchback.

For whatever reason, I only meet one other person as I'm climbing this set of many little grades. (At least, so far, I'm writing this from a spot near the top, I'm guessing.) He was

a tall man with a walking stick and an enormous backpack. We made no greeting — no uncomfortable greeting for me. I think he must be 20 years older than me. Sometimes I get along better with the older people, but I do wonder what would have happened if I had greeted him. Maybe he likes being greeted, but does not like to initiate that kind of thing.

And now, as the sun sets, I find myself having gone several miles on down the road from the top of the switchbacks. At this point, I'm on a plateau that has a few substantial outcroppings of rocks. I've made camp next to the road, beside some boulders. (By that I mean, I've set down my backpack.) The air up here is cool and dry at night, unlike down in the swamp. I am glad for that. I am also glad that I bought shoes down in the village, for a considerable but worthwhile sum. I suppose my feet can begin to heal, at least partially.

7.

About ten miles into my journey today, I've arrived at a town. I don't have a lot of money, so I'm trying not to spend any here, but I did stop at a place where they keep horses, trade some of my extra food for a groom's extra pair of pants. The pants that I'm wearing have a hole in them, and I want to look as little like a Redface as possible (the famous new city term for an emigrant, immigrant). I don't mind being looked at as fresh-faced or foreign, and I know that

most likely I'll be okay, but I don't want people trying to take advantage of me. Why tempt them? Maybe there will be a person given to cheating people, who will go a whole day without cheating someone because I'll be wearing these new pants. And maybe that will help them develop more self-respect than otherwise, and they'll turn to another way of living. Or perhaps not. But in any case, I have judged it proper to acquire these new pants.

The town consists of two streets intersected by three streets. There's a general store, shortwave radio station, the stable I mentioned, a small school, a post office, and a few other businesses. There are some houses here in town, but I think most people live in the countryside around here.

I ask the groom what kind of living people make around here, and he replies, Oh it's all sheep and cattle. If you get out a little bit in the country you'll see them all over.

I was surprised about the cattle. I asked the groom what they would do with the cows? Was there a big dairy around? And he said Well, we eat meat in these parts, and also make things out of the cowhides. And that made me wonder a bit. He said, It all has to do with the way the land is. You've noticed how it's pretty dry, right? Yes, I said. And the way the soil is, it's hard to plow. This area, a long time ago, was the bottom of a lake, if you believe it. Soil's all clay. But now it's all dried out, and not too much grows.

That struck me as true.

But so it's not worth plowing, he continued, But it does make sense to have the cows and sheep out grazing out there somewhere, and then the cowboys and the shepherds come to us to get more horses, and then we get more horses to replace those horses, and that's how I make a living, he said, smiling a little grin. How about you? he asked. I see you're from the north. How do you make a living up there?

And I told him, I've been unemployed the last two years, but before that, I just had whatever I could get.

Yeah, he said, with sympathy, Times are hard.

Well, it's not all that, I replied, It's more just an issue in my own life. I'm kind of restless.

Oh, yeah, there's lots of young men your age who are like that. Who knows what will become of them?

I think we'll turn out alright, I replied.

Yes, yes, he said, I suppose you will.

But it will take some adjustment for us! I replied with a little warmth.

Yes, yes! Adjustment! the middle-aged groom said to me.

We laughed and parted ways.

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And as I've been walking, sure enough, I see little white dots on the hills, those little sheep, and I can see cattle lined up and then unlining about a mile off on the plains.

I notice along the road little shrubs. I guess this is what the animals eat. Little birds are flying by me, little songbirds.

Maybe twice or three times an hour, someone rides by on horseback, or I see someone dragging one of those four-wheeled carts. Sometimes they have produce, which I guess is intended for the general store. Other times I can't tell what they have, because it's covered over with a cloth. I wonder about the people who walk. Can they transport enough in one trip to make it worth it? But then I figure maybe they're not going to the general store after all, maybe they're selling direct to their neighbors.

I get kind of hungry as I walk, and I could easily stop to eat, but I want to see where this hunger takes me. Sometimes I've found hunger a valuable way to get in touch with certain feelings. I think hunger can space a person out. But it can also make a person have stronger desires. Sometimes when I'm hungry, I care about people more.

Today, it seems like my hunger, as I walk, is causing me to get caught up even more in the flow of walking. But I can tell that I'm getting too tired, from the lack of sustenance, so I decide to end this fun experiment, and have some of my rations.

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Now I've made it past the next town, into the scrublands, and I see up ahead, maybe three miles ahead, what looks like an encampment. I wonder what I'll find there. Will it be a hospitable place? Does it cost money to camp there?

Here I am at the campsite, and there's music playing, some old man playing guitar and singing. It looks as though this is some family reunion. The people sit around and don't say much, which is interesting, as, from what they told me, they haven't done this for four years. But perhaps, if they were more the type to talk, they would gather more frequently than four years. What do I know?

They're friendly enough to me, and make sure I have something to eat. They have a meat stew, and I try a little, but as an old city type, I'm not sure I want any more than a little. There's something about it that's really quite delicious, but at the same time, there's something about it that makes me set the deliciousness aside. They have some bread and cheese as well, and some lima beans, which I gladly eat. In exchange, I tell them stories about the old city, and also offer one of their little girls the handkerchief from before when she goes on and on about her visit to the Southern City neighborhood. The girl looks at it and says "No thank you, I already have one" very graciously, and I put it back in my backpack.

They let me bed down near the fire and I feel grateful, as I write this.

8.

I woke up stiff this morning, got up, stretched, said my good-byes to the people still left (I slept in a little, and some of them had a long way to go and packed up right around dawn).

I got out on the road and thought about how much further I had to go. At 20 miles a day, it would be five more days. Or, I reflected, I could maybe find some way to take a ride to my destination, perhaps on someone's horse or horse-drawn cart. I wondered how much something like that might cost.

I knew that I had enough money to pay for some sort of ride, but I wanted to save the sum that I had for expenses when I got to the city. There are more boundaries, rules and closed-off places in a city, that was my experience from the old city at least, which would make money more of a necessity.

So the next town I came to, I reasoned that if I could find work, not that that was a guaranteed thing, then I could earn enough money in a day to save me 2 or 3 days' walking. So I went around town, greeting people, being as friendly as possible. The people in the town hadn't heard of casual greeting, but they understood that a traveler in need might break into their lives a little, and they were mostly understanding of my situation. One of them finally said, Yes I have some ditches you can help dig, and gave me a shovel.

And so I dug a ditch for this man all day long, and it's night time, and I'm staying out behind his property, in a little shed. I've earned enough today to pay for a ride on a horse.

9.

There were no horses for hire in this town, so I made for the next town. And as I walked, someone came from the north, riding, and I suddenly caught the thought to ask for a ride. I can pay! I said, and the rider let me on behind him. He wasn't going all the way to the new city, just a day's ride in that direction. But that saved me three days' walking, which I certainly appreciated. I paid him after I got off at the destination.

That ride was painful to me. I'm not used to riding horses, as I'm from the city.

But, I'm that much closer to my goal. What's a little pain when there's something valuable to be gained? Indeed, the pain is over to one side, and the reward is flowing toward me ever more surely, in the center of the stream of time.

The man didn't charge me as much as I was prepared to pay, because he was going the same direction as me, anyway, so I had some extra money. I thought to stay in town, in an inn, but then thought again. It is worthwhile to save money when you're poor. A poor person's glory is to endure—a saying I heard one time. I don't know about glory, it seems like an odd concept. But, I'll be happier to have this money in the future than to spend it now. So I head out, a mile or two out of town, and find a little spot among some shrubs.

And I'm settling down for the night, and looking up at the clear sky with its multitude of stars. There's a wind blowing,

I guess that wind will curl around into the Grand Valley and pick up all the heat and humidity of the swamp and maybe there will be a thunderstorm.

10.

It looks like, if I've read the map right, in two days' time I can make it all the way into the city, all the way to my property.

So today, with the end in sight, all I can think about is the city. I know better than to keep thinking all this, because it doesn't do me any good to think so much. Aren't there other things I could think about? I could be paying more attention to what's on the road, or to the people who pass by, now, more than before, perhaps one every 5 minutes.

I think so hard about the city, about rest, about going to a restaurant, about my new property, about the cheap but wonderful hotel that I'd get to sleep in, about figuring out what to do with the rest of my life, that I hardly noticed when the woman with the long brown hair started talking to me, not in greeting but to tell me that my backpack was open. I was embarrassed, although I didn't care that I was embarrassed, and tied it off at the top. She handed me some things that had fallen out of it. I thanked her and asked her where she was going. She said she was going to the new city. I saw that she was matching my pace and we talked for quite a while. She appeared to be about my age, and in a similar situation: unemployed in the old city, promised a place to stay by some relatives in the West

Quarter (which was not the neighborhood of my property), and unsure what to do with herself. She had some dreams, to be an artist, but she was realistic, she knew that she was not the best artist and that maybe she would have to find some other way to live creatively. As well as being an artist, something she practiced in her free time, she was also experienced as a traffic enforcer. We reminisced about great intersections we had both been involved in, she professionally and I as a walker. There was that one 6-way intersection near Uitleyn Tower...

She told of how she became proficient at figuring out who was going to try to rush the phase when she looked the other way, or who was just impatient to obey the law. She couldn't tell me how to tell, myself, but she would just know, by looking at them.

One of the challenges of her job was that she had to stay out until after the roads shut down. So she had to ride her bike home at dusk, with all of the intersections unregulated. This was ordinarily fine, and no reason to change to a different line of work, but occasionally she got into accidents with other city workers.

I told her a few of the interesting stories of my past, and eventually we fell into silence, a companionable silence. At the end of the day, we found ourselves at a small town, and she wanted to sleep in the inn, and I am about to sleep outside, where I write this.

I wonder if I'll see her ever again. In the morning? In the city? We did exchange addresses, but how long will she live

where she lived, and how long will I collect mail for my property? I may soon enough wish to sell it.

11.

I woke up before dawn, excited to finish my journey, and I thought of waiting for the woman from yesterday, but I decided not to wake her if she slept, and not to wait.

So I set out on the road, with about half a day's journey to the edge of the city.

As I got closer, I could see the many buildings, and the occasional tower, monument, or flagpole rising above the city mass. I made it to the outskirts after a few hours, where people lived in little clusters around the train lines. Out here, the trains only run once a day, so these people can't quite be called suburbanites. The people I talked to out here had their own accent. I would have caught the train but I was a little bit late for the daily, so I kept walking.

I wondered how much the train cost, so I asked some of the townsfolk. Ay, they said, Son, you must be from somewhere else, are you from up north?

And I said, Yes, that's so.

Ah well, they said, Down here, we don't pay for the train, it comes out of taxes. So thank the honest citizens for the train! I take it you're not a tourist, there aren't too many of those.

I nodded.

Then become an honest citizen yourself!

With that advice, we parted, and I continued.

So, if I could just catch the train in the next town, I wouldn't have to walk too much further.

As I walked, I saw clouds forming in the distance. I wondered if it would rain. Even more reason to get off the road. Then, I reached the edge of the city proper, which was still almost ten miles from my property. I wanted to get on the train there, at the station right inside the city limits, but the attendant said, Sorry sir, due to clouds, we cannot operate a train this far out at this time. We will be skipping the next three trains, if the weather holds as it does. If you would like to wait, please have a seat. The next train will be coming in a little less than two hours.

I thought this was reasonable, so I sat down and picked up one of the novels that was left on the end table by the chairs. It was pretty good. I think it was a love story. I wrote down the name: The Guardian of the Mountain. The attendant saw me reading it and said Are you a fast reader?

A lot of people only get to the part where she says I would never be caught dead with flowers and she laughs coquettishly, but about 1 in 10 readers get as far as where he kills the leopard and she gets mad at him. A few have even made it further.

I told her that I was a slow reader and I would be lucky to get through three chapters. And she laughed a little and said Are you enjoying the book so far? And I said Yes, I think so. And she said If you want to buy any snacks, I can go back behind the counter and ring you up.

I thought this was kind of her to offer and said No thank you, I have some old rations to use up.

Oh, so are you from the old city?

Yes, I said, I've come here to check things out, maybe to stay.

Wow, she said, I haven't seen a northerner in a while. Is there anything interesting going on up there?

No, not really, same old thing. The economy is pretty stagnant, politics as usual.

She laughed. Oh we know about politics as usual down here. Listen, I'd keep talking, but I have to clean the bathrooms, so just enjoy your book.

And with that she disappeared to get cleaning supplies.

I found myself at the part in the book where the mother says to the heroine Don't worry about the family finances, follow your heart, which really moved me, when I heard the crossing gates come down a ways away and then eventually the train came into the station, switching over to the southbound track, as I suppose this was as far north as it

would go. I got on board the train, hoping to find a seat that was faced south, and because this was the end of the line, I easily did so. I was glad to sit there because I sometimes get motion-sick when “riding backwards” on a train. And then the train got underway and zipped very nicely south, covering the remaining distance to the city core in 15 minutes, stopping every 2 minutes or so to let people on and off.

And so I got off in the bustling center of the new city. The buildings around here were tall (6 or 7 stories), and I saw many groups of people walking in and out of shops and cafes and workshops and markets. There were office buildings and many buildings that had some kind of retail on the ground floor and several stories of dwelling places on top.

I found EL6 street, which was the major street nearest to EL7 street, and I followed it in the hopes that it would have a bridge across the ravine. It was a little unclear from the map. It did not, so I had to go out of my way several blocks, until I did find a bridge.

The ravine was fenced off on the core side, and I could see on the other side people’s trees and gardens, giving a safe buffer between the inevitable erosion and the people’s abodes.

I got to the bridge and crossed over, and looked at the ravine, containing no one that I could see, no one camping or walking, and the ravine continued away to the northwest and then curved out of view to the west, and to the

southwest and then curved out of view to the southeast. I finished crossing the bridge and then found the street to get me back to EL7.

When I arrived at EL7, I got out my notebook and saw where I'd written down the address. 6614 EL7 Street, New City. All I saw were apartment buildings or apartments mixed with commercial. Most of them were 4 stories high. I was beginning to wonder if I was getting into more money and complication than I knew what to do with: my uncle had left me all of one of these. The thought of the money was overcoming my sense of being overwhelmed, when I came across an ordinary-looking building that said 6600 - 6699 EL7 St. I supposed that my apartment was somewhere inside this complex, so I knocked at the door of the office and they let me in and I sat down in a hard chair.

Sir, you are here to inquire about renting an apartment? We have only one vacancy at the moment which is pending the disposition of an estate and is not available at this time. If that is all your business, I advise you to return in 30 days' time when we have settled the estate.

You see, that's just the thing, I said, I'm here to inherit some property from my uncle, who died recently.

Oh, they said, Well, let's get this all sorted out.

And so we did, and soon enough they gave me the key to my new apartment. This apartment was mine, I would never have to pay rent on it as long as I owned it. I felt happy to finally have some property to my name.

I opened up the apartment and I had to laugh: it was tiny! It was about 10 feet by 5 feet total. I have been in a number of closets up in the old city which were larger than this room, my prized possession.

You'll find that you have a lot of neighbors, said the apartment manager, and it hit me: this place really had 100 addresses, every single number from 6600 to 6699. It amazed me that so many people would live so close together, but I reasoned that, I wasn't in the old city anymore. This is how things were designed here.

My room looked like it was designed for nothing more than sleeping, changing clothes, and storage. It had my uncle's things, everything he left here when he went to the hospital for the last time. At that point, he was weak and probably didn't have a lot of energy to devote to arranging things for my benefit. I did find a letter addressed to me from him, which I decided I would open tomorrow, after a full night's rest.

The room was a rectangle with the door on a long side. On the opposite long side there were cubbies and shelves from a height of about 2.5 feet up to the 8-foot-high ceiling. I saw some comforters and a blanket laid out underneath the cubbies and shelves, as though my uncle slept there.

Is that where my uncle slept? I asked.
Did he take his mattress?

No, they said, He had no mattress. The comforters were his mattress. And it occurred to me then that it would be difficult to get a mattress in the door and into place underneath the cubbies and shelves.

I thought about the places I'd lived in back in the old city: first my parents' home, with 10 rooms for 4 people, then my first apartment when I left home, with space for a king size mattress and a dresser, and my own bathroom, and then I remembered the squats I had to live in over the last two years, those mold-traps in the abandoned neighborhoods, those neighborhoods that we would probably be abandoning for another 100 years. One thing they all had in common: space.

But here, it seems, I'll have to share a bathroom (and I've inherited a tenancy with some rank, which means that I'm responsible for the nearest bathroom, I have to make sure it stays clean, although I may ask for help in doing so.) And if I want to read, I'm probably better off in the library / study room, the quiet meeting room. And if I want buy a laptop some day, I'd be better off using it in that room or the other common room, the sociable one. But then I found out that there were two each of these rooms, and I felt a little more at ease, a token of good news defusing the sense of bad news.

(I'm writing this diary in the quiet common room that has all the books, the library.) And it looks like what most people do is go out to do what they're going to do in the town, rather than doing much of anything back at home, until night falls. I don't know if I'll be spending much time here in this room except perhaps on weekend afternoons.

My uncle left a lot of stuff, and I looked through it all, some books, some clothes, various items, medications. It turns out they have a nurse for this and the nearest three apartment buildings, who lives in our building. I'll give her these excess medications, which haven't expired — tomorrow. I think that's what you're supposed to do — or maybe it's not, but she would know.

The only item I'll really write about now, because there's a story to it, is the amulet. My uncle left this necklace, a little yellow carved figure on a chain. As I looked at it, I felt a twinge, but an unmistakable twinge, of foreboding. And then I put it on, and felt a feeling of relief and then of warmth, of the word Yes. I liked that feeling, so I decided I would wear it regularly. Although, it seems, every time I go to put it on, I get that twinge of foreboding. Maybe it's like taking a shower, something which has to break some kind of "surface tension" in my psychology, and then I am happy to get wet.

After all that, after my shower, after I cleaned the extra blood off my feet, after arranging my own possessions in the few shelves and cubbies they require, I think it's time to go to bed. It's barely getting dark, but I'm tired enough. I'm still on the traveler's schedule and not yet adjusted to the hijinx and relative physical immobility of city life. But I have some inkling of the hijinx as I see people walking the halls, engrossed in conversation, laughing, glad to be off work. It's probably hard not to make some kind of friend in a place like this. I'm glad that these rooms were designed to be highly insulated, highly soundproofed, even the doors are thick. I'm glad that they thought of that.

12.

I woke up, fully rested and ready to take on the day. It was 10 AM, and so many of my neighbors had already gone to work.

I looked through my uncle's stuff some more, and found a handwritten manuscript, bound with a binder clip. It was entitled Letters to People Who Care. I flipped through it briefly, but found my uncle's handwriting foreboding, and then remembered the letter, which I thought probably more to my purpose. Still, I was interested to read what he wrote, but perhaps a little later.

I opened the letter and it read like this:

—Dear Paul,

If you are reading this, I have passed on and left you a few things. I'm sorry I can't provide an inventory of things. I did, but then found myself giving things away, and I was too exhausted to keep track of exactly what. So you'll find what you find.

You'll find that there are people who knew me here. I chose you because I thought, of all my relations, you would fit in here best, and also, you were one of the few who would be free to move down here.

I will mention one of my possessions in particular, which is my manuscript, entitled Letters to People Who Care. I want you to carefully type it up and not let it get lost. Make some copies. See what you think of it, maybe it's something that other people want to read, maybe it's not. This is a little responsibility that I didn't think I could entrust to anyone else. But if you don't get around to it, that's fine. I'll rest just as much in peace.

I have fond memories of the time I stayed at your house when you were young. Remember the time you almost set the backyard on fire? It's a good thing I was around the house that day!

Well, anyway, have a nice life at EL7. Or maybe you'll move somewhere else soon. I hope it's better than what you had before.

Your (probably by now deceased) Uncle,
Dmitri—

After reading that, I was even more curious what the manuscript said, but I thought I should see if I could find a computer in this apartment building, where I could type it up. So I took it and went walking around the complex, exploring.

I found a computer room, with word processors for rent for 50 cents an hour. I sat down and started to type the manuscript, and after an hour the word processor locked up and said To Continue, Insert Coins, so I did.

I finished typing up the manuscript, and then I copied the files to my flash drive and printed out a couple of hard copies (costing about \$4 total). I was glad I'd learned to type, and I was glad to have the extra money to perform the chore. One of the hard copies I'm going to keep myself, along with this diary, and the other I'm going to take to some kind of expert in literature, if I can find one not too far away, because there are some intriguing things in the manuscript — things which I'd ask my uncle about, were he still alive.

Having done all that, it was now time for lunch. But then I realized that I didn't have any clean clothes, and that reduced rates at the laundry room would only last another two hours. I decided to eat some of my leftover rations in the laundry room, while my clothes washed and dried.

While I was there in the laundry room, reading a magazine, an older woman came in, maybe in her 60s or early 70s.

She asked me my name and I said Paul, what's yours? And she said Jennifer. She said, You must be new here, are you Dmitri's nephew? And I said, Yes, that's so. And she said, Oh, Dmitri was such a good man, I'm sad to see him gone. Did you know him well?

Not the best, I said, with respect. I spent a little time with him when I was a kid, and we would exchange letters on my birthday.

Oh, so you must have been his favorite nephew, she surmised.

I don't know, I replied. I wouldn't have guessed it. The letters always seemed perfunctory to me. And they stopped when I turned 18.

I suppose you never know. Well, he might have had his own things to think about. In any case, I'm glad to see you here.

Thank you.

Do you need a job? she asked.

Yes, I do.

Well, she said, I'll ask around to see if anyone knows of anything.

Thanks! I exclaimed.

I'll let you get back to your magazine, she said, as she got out her crocheting.

What are you crocheting? I asked.

A baby bonnet.

How nice, who's the lucky family?

My daughter and son-in-law, she said, smiling.

How nice, I replied, nodded, then looked at the laundry making its somersaults.

We sat in silence as our laundry washed and dried, and I settled back into reading the magazine, eating my rations. She made me feel peaceful, she had that effect on me.

After my laundry and lunch were done, I went out in the courtyard for the first time. The courtyard was spacious, paved in tile. There were umbrella tables here and there, and in each corner, a fountain. One fountain was of a dragon spraying mist over a well-mannered streambed. The mist felt good at 2PM, this warm, dry day. Another fountain was of a spider with a web, and something like a sad vampire, weeping copiously. Another fountain was of a beautiful woman pouring water on a beautiful child's head. The fourth fountain was of a kitten and a puppy both lapping at the same water dish, which was continually being refilled.

The courtyard was empty of people except for a young woman, probably about 20 years old, sitting at one of the umbrella tables, absorbed in sketching or scribbling in a diary. I wasn't in a greeting mood, so I left her be. I wondered if she was a university student.

I felt kind of tired and lazy, but I reasoned that if I took a nap now, I wouldn't be able to sleep as well tonight, so I went to my room, put on some clean clothes, then went out to explore the neighborhood on foot. My feet still hurt from all the walking before, but not too bad after a day of rest.

I went out through the office, which was the only way in or out, except in emergencies. The office was located at the

corner of the lot, and I could see the office of one of the neighboring apartment buildings across the street. I wondered if there was some kind of kinship between apartments that had their offices like that. I imagined that it would be especially easy to travel between the two complexes at night.

I knocked on the door of the neighboring complex's office and introduced myself. I asked if I could look around. They said, If no one invited you, you may not enter. And I said, Thank you, and left. Well, maybe I'd meet someone. While I was in the office, I could hear some young boys playing soccer in their courtyard.

I looked at the porches of the apartment building, connecting to the street. Rich people lived here, in two bedroom apartments — doctors, lawyers and others who liked this part of town.

I walked a long way down EL7 until it turned onto E5, the main road in the East Quarter. The streets had a decent number of people on them, really, a lot more than I would normally see at this time of day in the old city. But I thought that that made sense because this area was more densely developed.

I could see not too far but not too close one of the towers that I might have seen on my way into town. I walked in its direction down the busy street, bicycles whizzing past, traffic enforcers calling out at intersections, little shops waiting to be patronized, smelling woodsmoke from restaurants and glues and dyes from the little industries. My

eyes focused on the tower and after about an hour I reached it.

The tower was 80 feet tall, made out of what appeared to be stone on the outside, a square tower, but as I entered, I could tell the stone was a bit of a facade, it filled in the walls but didn't provide the main structure, which was concrete with rebar. There was a staircase which I climbed, eight stories up. On each floor, there were people sitting, young lovers holding hands, groups of adolescents playing guitars (I realized it was after school). There was a little class being taught, and I saw people walking up and down the stairs, with weights, getting their exercise.

The tower was large, each floor was spacious, with minimalist furniture, blocks and benches, which could be moved with some effort. You could see through grates and grilles out at the city, sturdy grates and grilles which prevented children or foolhardy youths from any harm, any falls.

I walked up to the top floor, where people were playing tennis on nets they'd brought themselves, and I looked out at the city, and I liked what I saw. Towers, monuments, boulevards, courtyards, clumps of bicyclists clogging the streets, hand carts in the rightmost lanes, traffic circles and great intersections, and the ravine, and the taller buildings of the city center, where particularly fit people lived, or tired people at the very end of the day. I could see off in the distance some of the larger industrial buildings, which were clumped behind soundwalls. I wondered if there was a job for me in one of them. And that made me think of Jennifer,

which made me think of the apartment, which suddenly made me think of the long walk back and what time was it? and what time was sunset? And I did a little math and decided I needed to briskly leave. So I did, carefully descending the stairs, hitting the road, motivated and finding myself still sore from my long journey, but still outwalking everyone, passing everyone, wondering if I should buy a bicycle, wondering if the train would work better for my life which had not yet developed. I found myself stepping out into the rightmost lanes to pass, carefully, legally, then back onto the sidewalk, yet, I found myself going slower than I intended, and yet I made it back home before the roads were officially closed. I entered the apartment building and took a shower and got out some more leftover rations, telling myself I'd have to figure out some other way to live (better food) soon, but not yet. I walked downstairs and into one of the "loud" common rooms, where people were gathered, and I saw a lot of them eating lentils and rice. I wondered about this, it certainly looked more appetizing than my rations, and they said Oh, you must be the new tenant. You can get some in the kitchen if you have a dollar or two. They pointed down the hallway and I entered the kitchen. In there, there were two large pots of lentil stew, and a big bowl of rice. Would you like a small or a large? the kitchen attendant said. I asked for a large, paid my \$2, and she served a bowl. Thank you, I said, and returned to the loud common room. I supposed I'd eat my rations some other time, maybe as a midnight snack, some hungry night.

Jennifer came in to have dinner, and she started introducing me to people, and I ended up getting connected to a job

lead. The recycling plant 4 stops away on the train was hiring sorters. It sounded like something I could do, so I determined that I would go in first thing tomorrow morning and see if I could get the job.

After dinner, people went this way and that, and I found myself in conversation with some people about my age.

One of them was named Joanna, another named Tony, another named Ray Ann, another named Elizabeth. Ray Ann was kind of a ringleader type, an introducer, and we sat around sharing information about each other. Pretty soon it was fully dark in the room, and we sang some songs. I only knew about half the songs, and about half of the northern songs I knew, they didn't.

Tony told some good stories, he had a good mind for movie plots. We talked about maybe seeing a movie. Ray Ann made me part of the group so quickly, that I was already invited to go to the movies on the weekend. I felt like, why not? I felt like, I've already found my best friends for the next year or decade. I knew that maybe this wasn't the case. But I was going to trust it was the case, at least, this weekend I would.

Eventually we all got tired, turned on our flashlights, walked to our respective rooms, and here I am, using up my flashlight batteries, writing all of this out.

LETTERS TO PEOPLE WHO CARE

By Dmitri S. Jones

The letters that follow were written to four people who care.
Following that is a letter intended for a general audience.

PERSON A:

Is suffering evil?

Some people say it is. I would tend to agree with them. But then I think about myself. I don't consider all suffering evil, of the suffering which has affected me. I went running today. My muscles were stiff from running yesterday. I don't think the pain of that stiffness is evil. I experience depression sometimes. Well, I don't know if depression is a specific enough word for our bad moods. I think other people's depression is different than mine. I wish I could explain how it felt in specific words, but I'm not there right now, so I can't remember it too clearly. I know it involved pain. This pain can be quite intense, and yet, I don't consider it evil.

I can remember some bad relationships that I've had where I was kept from being my best self. These relationships weren't necessarily as painful as my depressions, but they kept me back from being my best self, and so they were ultimately worse for me than depression. Eventually, even

though in the moment, they were pleasurable, my body started to react to them, knowing that I had someone better to be. Because the relationships were evil, they became painful.

Sometimes it's worse to succeed at the wrong thing than to fail. You can be very happy, but when you're happy, you're happy as you are.

Can suffering keep a person from being their best self?

Certainly. If you suffer, you will sometimes do a lot to get relief. You have a choice of how to view yourself. Do you look at yourself as being worth keeping from giving in to temptation? Then you will have to suffer more in life, as temptations come to try to pull you from that identity. If you hold to your identity, then you have valued that identity by having paid for it with suffering. Ultimately, you value the best aspects of your self, and you love yourself at a higher level. But temptations will present you with the opportunity to reject yourself, while in exchange you get some (at least temporary) relief from suffering.

Endurance's work, I think, is to keep you holding on to the good in yourself. Temptation's work is to get you to throw away the best parts of you.

—

I think that respect can be linked to people becoming their best selves. If you show someone else respect, then you'll tend to give them the space to be themselves, and you won't devalue who they're trying to be, or who they are. And

that's an environment in which someone can become their best self.

I don't tend to dress in nice clothing, but when I go to funerals, depending on the relationship I had with the deceased, I make the gesture of wearing a black dress shirt.

I put it on and then go out to the site of the funeral, and maybe say something in remembrance of the deceased. I try to remember some aspect of their life, even if I didn't know them too well, and though I'm not prone to sadness, as a person, I put on a kind of sadness as a kind of emotional clothing in keeping with the black dress shirt I'm physically wearing. It is a real sadness, although I know that it is different from the sadness that overwhelms. It's something I choose, and affirm. I will be sad in honor of the one who died, so that I am in my own reflected way, (though, like an echo, it's quieter) a kin to the people who are there, honoring the deceased with a more violent, more raw, wilder grief. I am respecting the living by respecting the dead, I am saying that they are right to miss this person, that their taste of hell is worth going through, because it was worth knowing the deceased in the first place.

When we know the truth, we have inside us a representation of the world around us. Empathy is part of this. Empathy is a paying of respects to the inner world of the people around us.

How does callousness feel? It feels like power, comfort, fullness, having the answers, (or, being on the right path), it feels pretty good, although it can coexist with misery, it can feel like you're never going to die, yet it feels like your numb

tongue after you've burned it, there are certain things which curiously enough you don't taste, although you can see them.

But what if you really are on the right path? If you're on the right path, that inner feeling of being on the right path will not impress you or fill your heart, but instead when you find someone struggling with temptation, you'll be impressed by, and focus your heart on, the other person's struggle or even vulnerability with evil.

—

I've finished my tea a while ago, and I'm getting kind of tired, but there are more things I could write.

———

It is another day, and I am sitting with a friend at my usual cafe.

—

In my last letter, I talked about "the best self". What is the best self? I would say it is who you would be at the end of eternity spent interacting with other persons, if you had the free choice to become whoever your heart desired. It's important to be who you've always been, and I think that holding onto or rediscovering the best of who you've always been is absolutely necessary for you to become your best self. But in some ways, you may find your heart desiring a

new person for you to be, and the more people you know, the more suggestions you will have for who to become.

I recommend Jesus for personal reasons. I find his person to be the most beautiful. But if my testimony is not sufficient, I can at least tell you that a number of other people believe so. Perhaps you could look at other people, like Abraham Lincoln, or Simone Weil, or Malcolm X. Or perhaps there is someone you know personally.

Imagine all the people of the world forming a vast library, each one a book. You will not read every book, so which will you choose? I would have to recommend, personally, that you read the character of Jesus.

I think the only preface I would make to your reading the Gospels (that is, those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is to say that Jesus, the character, is God in human flesh.

There are some features of him that only make sense in his Godhood. Some of his authority is such. But there are features of him that make sense for us as humans to potentially adopt. I think from that, and your reflections, it will be clear to you how to evaluate the character named Jesus.

CH. 2: Person B:

You've got two things you care about, that you think about and invest in: the long-term sustainability of human existence, and, in the relief of hopeless suffering, honoring those who suffer intensely by listening to them.

And yet you feel as though there is no future in things, that everything is passing away and obsolete. And you find yourself not caring about the people who are greatly suffering. You're fake, but you remind yourself that even if you are fake, they are still crying out in despair, but yet still this doesn't produce the feeling in you that you wish you could rely on.

And so your feelings go against what you really believe in. If there is no future, if your feelings are right in that, then there is nothing to do for anyone. But what if you are wrong? What if there is a world you can invest in, and you do not act in it? You look at the prize, of people given hope, and the world-system itself given hope, and— how beautiful to make what would at best be a gesture, to work for this if there's no future, and without any sense of meaning.

You have determined that you will keep on living, you have not as yet decided to die. What will you do to pass the time that inevitably comes with continuing to live?

Your feelings may or may not be trustworthy. But your actions in the flow of time will be what they will be, reflecting how your heart responds in a doubting and even uncertain situation.

CH. 3: Person C:

I saw your post about an important humanitarian issue. In it, you said something nasty about people who don't act on the issue.

I can understand why you would do that. You were trying to be annoying. If you annoy someone, you make them take another look at themselves and then (wisely, you hope), change their ways.

I think this is a good way to go with some people. Unfortunately, it's the best way to go with some people. Why can't we be motivated simply by saying "Please, these people in trouble — help them!" Or even "Please, these people in trouble — let's help them!"

There's a difference between the first and second "help them!"'s. In the first, you and I are apart, and you're trying to make me take responsibility as a fellow individual to do my individual part. In the second, there is some kind of collective implied, you and I are in some sense together in helping the other people. And, since you have taken the initiative in showing me that these are people to be looked at, seen for who they are, and thus to be helped in some way, you have made yourself, to some extent, into a leader of me.

I know the feeling: I don't want to be a leader. I don't want to put myself on the hook. I don't want the responsibility.

The thought of people looking to me for direction, for "what to do next", is, maybe in some sense of the word, terrifying.

There's something vulnerable about leading, perhaps it looks like I'm taking things too seriously. I have all these mental blocks myself. And so I may understand why it is that you choose the route of "annoyance/individualism" and not "invitation/leadership".

When we are young and strong, we somehow think that we could, if given the time, heal the whole world. Some of us had no interest in healing the world, ever. But some of us did think so. And we thought that the solution to the world's problems was to cause everyone else to want to solve the world's problems, to become individuals just like us.

I think the definition of "leader" is, "someone who takes on the burden of healing the whole world". But that's not quite it. It's only half of it. A leader needs followers. So when we were young and strong, and we had no followers, we were not leaders, but we were something like leaders.

Then we grew older. Something within us changed. We were not so young, not so strong. We grew detached from faraway things, and focused more and more on the few things around us. We lost our drive, or rather, we became steadier at being ourselves, not as hungry to become. It became impossible for us to be as we were. Perhaps we never were so young nor so strong, after all.

And oddly enough, we were taught by that transition into age and fatigue deep lessons about what is really valuable.

Finally we understood the emptiness of egoism, the fakeness of so much of our youthful idealism. Finally we could love. But, we had gained that true wisdom at a terrible price: the very strength that would enable us to do something other than what our lives as they are and thus the status quo dictate. As much as we'd like to be different, as much as we remember the old days, for us, it's all over, we've died to what we once lived for, and we're running out the clock, wishing there was something we could really do, and contenting ourselves with at least having the right emotions — for once; when we were young we grasped so much wisdom but had all the wrong emotions.

Should everyone be a leader? Or at least a leader-like individual? That is, should everyone take it on themselves to heal the whole world? No. Not all people are gifted in the same way. If we must all be leaders of an army of one (this is what it's like to be a leader-like individual) then many of us, as we grow older, will lose the strength we formerly maintained and fall back into ourselves, old, tired individuals, no longer looking toward the world's salvation.

But, if in our age and fatigue, we can find a leader, that leader can provide us with the energy we need. Because it's not as though we lack the ability to convert calories into actions, as we age, it's that on a certain level we can't reach out into nothingness anymore and create ourselves out of that nothingness, we no longer have the spirit to defy the blank canvas. With the right leading, we could do amazing things for the human race, if we could just lean on someone to be better than us, to get out in front of us, take on as

much and more than us, in terms of both risks and challenges, and to not abuse us, to call out the best in us, perhaps in some sense, to die so that we don't have to.

We, as followers, have an important task, and potentially a difficult one, in finding a trustworthy leader. It is then the leader's task to be a trustworthy leader, and to also heal the whole world, through some specific vision. There's a process of reflectively seeing the truth, seeing reality come into focus. The follower has to discern a good leader, that's their main responsibility, while the leader has to discern their own goodness, and also the state of the world and specifically how to help heal it.

CH. 4: Person D:

You wonder at the state of our hearts, how it is that we don't care. Or at least, you did the last time I knew you. Why wouldn't you now? Perhaps for the same reason that I now find it difficult to care: there should be a name for this thing, this ceasing-to-care.

Ceasing to care, in a particular way. I think Stirner was writing about this when he wrote about the three stages of life. When we are children, we think about objects. When we are youths, we think about ideas. We are even possessed by them. When we are men, we think about ourselves. We have gained a stability, a self-regulation, which is in fact an

unmovedness. We no longer see things in terms of “How can we all save the world? How can I do my part?” but at best “How can I make some gesture, which may benefit some person?; not that I really care, but with great effort I can make a gesture.” We don’t believe that our lives will lead anywhere. Yes, our lives still develop and change. But somehow it’s completely different.

I think we both used to want, perhaps both still want (maybe I still want?) for there to be some kind of movement. You mentioned once about how nowadays, there’s no *polis*. As Fanon suggests in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the bourgeoisie live deep in their subjectivity, and by contrast it is the revolutionary people, the self-liberators, who live outside themselves, caring for all of their brothers and sisters who constitute their *nation*. We are so comfortable, individually, and that means, among other things, that we are so much at home in ourselves, that we do not get outside of ourselves to be part of any sort of nation. Some of us find our comfort miserable, but cannot get ourselves out of it.

You and I both know that we need other people for a movement. Why could you not be in my movement, nor I in yours? Somehow, although we both cared, we did not see eye to eye. We were too different. It’s supremely ironic that critical thinking is what “ought” to save society. But the more we have the habit of thinking critically, why would we not have the habit of thinking individually, and suspiciously, and with an eye toward establishing ourselves as individuals? And so we give everyone the tools to disbelieve other people, even if those people have the truth.

Ultimately, we have a failure of trust and trustworthiness.

The people who “know it all” aren’t trustworthy people and they don’t inspire trust. And the people who “ought to listen” are thrown back into being individuals, rather than followers, and thus will not listen, and thus will choose *something* to believe from somewhere. It could have been you or me they’d listen to, but we were not trustworthy.

I think one advantage that the older people have, those who have entered into whatever brand of maturity they have — a feature of this tired, non-possessed, limited-to-the-self maturity — is a realization that we are not leaders, nor will, as individuals, save or heal the whole world, or even really figure out how and motivate ourselves to do our part, that we really might rather find a good leader to follow, something which would have seemed preposterous to us when we were younger — back then we could easily manage to be heroic individuals.

I’ve written this letter in a stroke of caring, in a foray back into that invigorating place. I expect that tomorrow morning it will seem entirely insincere to me and that I’ll barely be able to think about the subjects I’ve broached in it. Of course, it could as easily be that I’m as insincere and in reality uncaring when I write (and am a youth) as when I am distant and unmoved (and am in some sense a man).

In all this talk about sincerity and insincerity, the important thing is that our society (the world that some of us can love, as a system) is wearing down, and interrelatedly, people do not have hope.

PERSON A:

I knew an artist once. This is the best I can remember him.

When he was younger, he would paint a canvas; actually, he painted a lot of canvases. Then, when he was older, he painted over the older canvases. His thinking at first was to save money on canvases. But he discovered that painting over the old paintings gave them an interesting texture, from the old paint. He put these paintings away, but over the years, he took them out and painted on more layers.

Eventually (finally?) he came to the process of removing layers. This enabled him to bring the painting to a rich new form.

Imagine if you were that canvas. You would be brought out, painted on, and then abandoned for years. And then brought out and painted on again, and eventually you would have your layers of paint removed — that might be painful. And the whole time, you would have no idea of what you looked like. You would think life was horrible, and would have no idea what anyone was getting out of you. You would know that you were a canvas, but you wouldn't really know who you were. Unless, perhaps, someone brought a mirror to you.

General Letter:

How can you know if you will become a person who doesn't really care? Or, more such a person? Today you care. But tomorrow you may take a step closer to not caring. And the next day, another step. Because you are someone who becomes, how can you guarantee that you will never in your life settle into smugness, dismissiveness, dead-heartedness and closed-mindedness? I think you need some kind of life in you, some kind of "yeast" or "leaven", which continually works on you to keep you away from that fate, to keep you as someone who cares.

I suppose you would also want to find that living, sustaining, awakening, encouraging, reality-basing spirit and communicate it to the people around you. Though, if I got all of you in a room together, you would find yourselves in some disagreement about exactly what to pursue, what the good is, what the nature of the problem is, what the natures of God and human beings are, I think it would be in each of your best interests to promote this principle and spirit, which is living, sustaining, awakening, encouraging, which over and over draws people out of their inner worlds and dead conclusions to look at reality, not only with eye and mind but with the heart, to feel in an accurate way in correspondence with the feelings of others. You yourself, I would think, should live, sustain, awaken, encourage, and practice the reconnection with reality.

You have to have a spine, a backbone, a set of things you're done with and a set of things you won't give up. How does this differ from smugness? Smugness is disrespectful, but you will be respectful, I hope. You can feel disrespectfulness and arespectfulness inside yourself, and likewise can feel respectfulness. This is a guide.

And in a world like ours, another guide is that you will mourn and cry out within yourself, you will weep with those who weep, feel limited in some ways by the convenient-spiritedness, the mockery, of the wicked. You will bear shame that doesn't belong to you, and you'll be tired and given to feeling a kind of pain: all in correspondence to the pain, fatigue, shame, the humiliation and the shutting down by mockery, the weeping, the crying out of the world. You will tend to come to relate to the world, to connect with the world as it is a real being, you will respect the world, know the world, even love the world, in the small way you can as a single human being.

—————

Postscript:

A thought has come to mind: is it possible to care too much?

It is possible to hate evil so much that we come to love and trust in hate itself. When we hate, we reject, and we can reject the truth. So out of smugness, we can be dismissive, and out of hate, we can reject. In either case, we can

become disconnected from reality based in a way that we feel.

Let us make things better out of love instead of hate.

13.

This morning I got up bright and early, before the sun, got dressed in my second set of clean clothes, packed my backpack (still have some rations).

I took the train to the recycling center and presented myself in order to get a job. The foreman looked me over and said, Okay, we'll give you a try, see how you do.

He sent me over to one of the workers and said, Follow him.

So I did. We went in to the assembly line which looped around the whole building. There weren't too many people there, we were early in the day, after all, but everyone worked quickly and efficiently. The worker I was shadowing sat in a chair that was halfway between hard and comfortable, but I had to stand in order to watch, which became uncomfortable after a while. He didn't say much, but I saw him tossing the items in a bin by his feet. Every so often, he'd call out loudly TRANSFER! and a guy would come by and put his bins on a cart and then return with fresh bins. While the bins were gone, about 45 seconds, he would

stretch, do jumping jacks, and (he told me) think extra positive thoughts. You have to be alert to do this job, he told me. Have to keep oxygen going to the brain.

He tossed the aluminums into the aluminum bin, the paper into the paper bin, the plastics into the various plastic bins, and the non-aluminum metal into yet another bin. It really looked like easy work, except for identifying the plastics. I watched carefully, trying to get a sense for what types of plastic were which type, based on the shapes of the containers, or the brands. He said, You'll get the hang of it, but it might take a while.

Just watching was getting boring and I asked if I could help and he said, No, you have to be an employee to do that, just keep watching. So I stood there and started to zone out. When he took his next break he punched me in the arm. You have to pay attention on this job, he said. Look at me. You don't want to mess up which thing goes where. That becomes someone else's job. If you do your job, the other person doesn't have to do theirs. Got it? I nodded to him. Good. And, his break was over and he got back to sorting.

In the early morning things were quiet, but around 10 AM an additional shift of workers filled in the spaces around the assembly line, and one worker got up at a microphone and started calling out lines from old songs, and the workers would respond with lines from the chorus. It wasn't really singing, maybe it was chanting, but over the sound of the recyclables and the hum of the machinery next door (which did more exciting things than what we were doing with the recyclables), it was most like yelling. I realized that the

sorter I was shadowing had a strong, but rough voice, and figured this might be an occupational hazard.

I found myself joining in, just to pass the time, and the workers looked at me with approval.

The recyclables came faster and faster, up to a peak around noon, and no one took lunch, just taking a few bites whenever their breaks came around. The pace continued strong until 2PM, and really didn't fully slow down until 3 or 4. Around 2, to make things especially engaging, I guess, the chanter started reading the newspaper on mic.

What's the news, what's the ne-ee-ews? we called out.

Man in Southern City shot in gang fight. he chanted back, putting a melisma in "fight".

What's the news, what's the ne-ee-ews?

City Parliament stands for election, 3 months from now, be sure to register to vote, cried the chanter, putting the melisma on "vote".

What's the news, what's the ne-ee-ews?

Artichokes 3 for a Dollar now at Torvald's Market!

I started to call out What's the news? as before but everyone else called out,

Ha ha, what's the real news?

I wondered if this was a venue for inside jokes.

At 4 o'clock, the worker I was shadowing and all the guys who had come early in the morning were done for the day, leaving the 10AM workers to work, I supposed, until late, maybe 6PM.

It's good to beat the rush home, my sorter said. But, I guess *that* means you have to hit the rush in the morning. Oh well, life is brutal, he said. Life is brutal indeed, I returned.

Do you think you still want the job? he asked. By the way, my name is Charles.

Yeah, I said, it looks good.

Well, then, show up at 8 in the morning tomorrow and find me and we'll get you going.

He took me over to the foreman and told him of my decision.

Okay, son, work hard, don't disappoint us, don't let down your city, have a good time, we'll pay you every 2 weeks, you have to give us 2 weeks' notice if you leave, we can fire you whenever we want, with cause, we can lay you off if things are bad and you'll be the first to go until we hire some other poor child after you, you can wear whatever you want, if you get injured on the job, let us know immediately and we'll take care of you, paternity leave — he looked at me — paternity leave is available according to the law and so on and so on. Oh, by the way, where was the last place you worked?

I was still trying to process his bored, industrial word-output, and he got impatient, but laughed at it. I'm getting too old, when you get old, everything else gets old fast. Where did you say you worked?

I gave him the address of that one job I had in the old city. Oh ho, he said, you're an immigrant. Okay, well, welcome to the New City. Come to work on time and never be late.

And this whole time he'd been filling out paperwork, he'd peeled off the blue and yellow carbon copies, gave me the blue, put the yellow in the filing cabinet and put the original in a pile marked To Go. (I suppose to some government agency.) And he immediately found no more use for me and I left.

There's a university on my way home on the train, so I stopped off there and found the Literature department. I came in and talked to the receptionist, a bright-eyed undergraduate, and asked him if I could see one of the professors about a work of literature I had. He asked me What kind of literature? I said, It's a kind of series of letters that might or might not be addressed to real people. I want to know what the literary references might be, if any. The undergraduate said, That sounds real interesting, but all the professors here are pretty busy.

Just then a professor walked into the office and saw the sheaf of paper in my hand.

Hello, what's your business here? she asked politely.

Oh, this is something my uncle wrote. I inherited it after he died, and I have some questions about it, but I can't really ask him, anymore, and I wondered if someone in this department could at least tell me if some of the things he wrote are established literary references, or if he was making it all up.

She looked at me and said, Come to my office, we'll talk about it.

I showed her the typed manuscript and pointed out what I thought might be references to literary figures or famous people. Of especial interest to me was Jesus.

It's interesting that your uncle points to "the Gospels" for the further edification of his reader or readers. I've never heard of these works. My feeling is that he was writing a work of fiction, writing to people who are not real.

Interesting, thanks, I said.

If you want, the next time I use the university's computer system, I can run a search for the terms you highlighted.

We'll keep the manuscript here overnight and you can come back — tomorrow? I nodded. Okay, well it was nice talking to you, this is the way out.

As we exited, I asked her what she normally studied, and she said Female Science Fiction Authors with a Specialty in Young, Wertheim, and Ade. I said that sounded very interesting and she said, Yes, it's very interesting to me.

With my mind half-made up about that, I got on the train and rode back home, arriving a little before sunset. I bought another dinner of stew and rice (tonight it was pinto bean chili and rice) and sat around with Ray Ann, Tony, Joanna, and Elizabeth. I told them all about my day at the job. And they told me about how their days went. Ray Ann was studying to become a lawyer. She told of classes and studying. Tony was a manager at a deli. He told of slicing meat, an exotic topic to me. Oh yeah, he said, if you want, come by and I'll let you try a little. He said, It's kind of like eating a mushroom — just a little bit. It's like, the way that mushrooms aren't like plants, it's not like plants, but it's also not like mushrooms. I wasn't sure I understood, but he said I should just try some sometime. If you want to see some death, I can take you to where our company slaughters them. I thought that might be good to see, every reminder of mortality is always a beautiful and ennobling thing.

Joanna was a bicycle repairwoman, and she told of the various stranded people she rescued all day long. Elizabeth was between jobs, living off of savings for a while, she said, thinking about what to do next. She told of the book that she read that day, which was a book on how to become a master closer. Do you want to become a saleswoman? I asked. No, it's just an interesting book. I'm interested in psychology, the way the human mind works. And we talked about that for some time. Soon enough, it was time to go to bed, so I went back to my room, and got ready for bed, then I went back out to the library with my flashlight to write out this diary, because I think it's more comfortable out here than it was in my room, using one of the cubbies as a desk

surface. This diary takes a little chunk out of each day — it's a good thing I need less sleep than the average person.

14.

I woke up feeling willful, like I didn't want to go to work, but I jolted myself up and out of bed, and got myself through my new morning routine and caught the train and got there and punched in and sat down and got to work. They only gave me two bins, paper and aluminum, which simplified things. I think it was only because I was being shown the ropes yesterday that the guy I shadowed had so many bins to work with.

I participated in the flow of things, feeling kind of bad, like I really wanted to be out walking. Maybe my legs were still addicted to walking, from all the exercise they got coming down here. At one point, I was somehow tempted to quit on the spot, but I forced myself to keep at it. I hoped that these negative feelings would go away over time as I got into the swing of things, but if they don't, then, well, life's brutal.

When I got home, I got my dinner and went to where I expected my friends to be. It was the last day of the work week, and I thought we might talk about the movie we were going to see during the weekend. Everyone was there except Ray Ann. We talked about whatever we could, and then she came in, looking strange.

What's wrong? asked Joanna.

Let's go to the courtyard, she said.

But there were too many people there for her tastes, so we went back inside. I guess we should go use a group room, said Tony.

So we entered the room, which was soundproof but had a window on the door and a window on the street side, and sat at the table.

There was a pause, and Ray Ann said with a kind of quietness, deadness, simplicity and awfulness, I was raped.

We looked at her with compassion and a feeling of knives in our chests.

She continued, I know him, a little, he lives over in the next building over. He was acting friendly and got me talking about law school. I went into his apartment to talk and he did it.

We were silent again. Joanna got up and hugged Ray Ann, and we all came close to her and put our arms around her and our hands on her shoulders.

She did not cry, but she nodded to acknowledge our concern.

What's his name?

Justin.

I didn't know who Justin was, but the others had some concept.

You should report him, said Elizabeth. After you see the nurse.

Ray Ann looked a little less hard, a little more tired, and nodded.

So Elizabeth and Joanna took her to see the nurse, to be examined and get the evidence secured. Tony and I talked about this and that, and then they returned.

We discussed what Ray Ann should do about Justin. We knew exactly how the case could easily turn out: Justin would claim that the encounter was consensual, it would turn into an inconclusive he-said, she-said thing, and the jury would have no choice but to rule Not Proved. And Justin would go away free. But with the right representation, perhaps Ray Ann would have a chance of getting a conviction. And because she was in law school, she knew people who knew people, who might get the district attorney to assign a better prosecutor to the case. It was chancy, but, she determined, it was a chance to see justice served. If no one ever pressed charges in these circumstances, what risk would there be to a prospective rapist, to dissuade him? We could at least bring him into court.

So we went to the computer room (by now lit only by laptop screens) and paid for after-dark network access and sent a formal message to the police department, explaining what had happened, and requesting to press charges.

Then, we all went to bed.

15.

The next day, we didn't feel like going to the movies, we really just wanted — what did we want? It was hard to say. We sat around most of the day.

Ray Ann would sometimes talk about her future. What if she got pregnant? What if she got a disease? The nurse had taken the necessary samples to determine if she was infected, but she wouldn't know if she had become pregnant for a little bit.

If she became pregnant, what would she do? She wanted to finish law school, pass the bar, become a lawyer. But if she had a child, she would become a mother, and it could be a long time if ever before she could get back to that dream. And she would have a child without having a father to help her, or she would have to find a father. She asked Tony if he might consider legally becoming her child's father, in the event that she got pregnant. She was very matter-of-fact about it, and Tony said Well, of course, if no one better can be found.

Who would be better? she asked. She wasn't friendly with too many men besides Tony, because she was so focused on law school. And it's a long, uphill slog to go from acquaintance after unworthy acquaintance and friend to the man who could actually be trusted as father.

And I suppose the rest of you would become the legal extended family of my child, if I have a child, even you, Paul.

I was a bit surprised at this familiarity. I didn't realize she trusted me so much.

It's okay, she said, You don't have to, you don't know me that well. But I trust you.

We tried talking about other things with some success, and went out for a walk, in the opposite direction from Justin's building, all of us feeling a curse coming from it. And so we passed the day, and returned at night, and went to sleep.

16.

The next day we spent time together but I wanted to go to the shortwave store to get a new transceiver, an excuse to get out and walk.

17.

The weekend over, I went to work. It was fine. I went home and hung out.

I was thinking about the issue of rape. I was trying to think of what I could do in response. It just bothered me to think of the situation. A lot of rapes don't even get reported, that's what they say in the newspaper. It's like people don't

trust the justice system. I was trying to think, like with Ray Ann's situation, is there any way that she could be guaranteed justice? And it seemed like, no. So I thought for a while, on my way home from work.

That night, Ray Ann seemed a little bit better. Instead of looking down, she looked hard. She had gone in to see the police and give her statement. Now she didn't want to talk about very much at all, and we tried talking about various topics, and she didn't participate too much, but she paid attention to each of us as we talked.

18.

Today I went to work and around noon, we had a slowdown. Some clouds blew in, which last night's forecast hadn't predicted. So they let me leave early. I knew that I'd miss half a day's pay, but I was fine with that. I was making enough money overall, at least for now.

With my time off, I decided to go get my hair cut. I found a barbershop up on the roof of a building, and paid, and sat down, and the guy gave me a speech, a story, a poem, and a haircut, just something basic to keep the hair out of my eyes for a while. While he was cutting my hair, it started to rain a little. Ah, he said, There's nothing I like more than cutting hair in the rain.

The wind picked up and blew the cut hair around, and I asked him if it ever went over the edge. How strange, if

someone else's hair were to rain down on you as you walked the street below. And he said, Usually not.

Then I remembered that I had left my manuscript over at the university a few days ago. So I went over and entered the Literature Department and waited for the professor to be available. She had office hours, so I sat and read out of a few collections of students' work, which were in volumes lying around the waiting area.

She finally came out and called me into her office. We talked for a bit. She said that the tests had confirmed that none of the references, not to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, nor to Fanon, nor Jesus or anyone else, matched up with known literary figures.

It seems that your uncle was writing some kind of work of fiction. He seems to have had a whole literary world that he referred to, which makes me wonder if he wrote anything else. Did he maybe explain who Fanon was in another text?

I said that I didn't know of any other writing by him, that's all I had found in his possessions in his room.

Interesting. Maybe he had some writing stored on a computer account?

No, I don't know of any computer accounts in his name. I'm not sure he used computers very much, after all, the manuscript was hand-written.

Okay, she said. Well, if anyone turns up references to the Gospels, or Fanon, or anyone else, I'll let you know.

I thought that was generous of her, given all of the busyness of her line of work, and thanked her and gave her my address and left.

By now it was time to go home, and I thought some more about what to do with regard to the issue of rape.

When I got back home, Tony, Elizabeth and Joanna were in their usual places, but Ray Ann was nowhere to be seen. I asked where she was and they said, She's studying. So I went over to the library, in the dimming evening light and saw her with her stacks of books and papers, reading and highlighting. I asked her what she was up to. She said, I'm studying.

I asked her, Why are you studying extra? Usually she let school be school and home be home.

I really want to get this done. I realize that not everything in life can be taken for granted. I don't know what kind of disruptions will come in my life, and right now I have the time to get extra work done.

I asked her what she would do when it got really dark. She got out a bag full of batteries. I got these, she said, And this (a battery powered desk lamp).

She really was serious.

I returned to the others and we discussed Ray Ann. We thought this new studying thing was good, but wondered what would happen if it turned out she was pregnant. Then we spoke of other topics. Elizabeth wanted to go visit Southern City sometime. Maybe we could go next weekend.

19.

I felt a kind of strange restlessness and nervousness and fatigue as I worked today. Life just being life, I guess.

I got off work and went home, and found that the usual people were nowhere to be found. Ray Ann was in the library studying, but I didn't want to interrupt her.

So I went wandering around and discovered a meeting room with some teenage boys in it, playing music. There were four of them, making the best of the end of the day, a drummer (playing a reduced kit, just a snare and hi-hat), a bass player, a trombone player, and a guitar player. The guitar player seemed to sing more than the others, yelling and almost being heard over the loud instruments.

I waved and they stopped playing, opened the door and told me to Come on in!

Then they got back to playing. It was some stirring traditional funk music. They played old standards like "Get On Up" and "Dance Yourself Awake". They did an instrumental which was perfect for the old style, of the

Golden Age of funk, but it was their own composition. They were pretty good for how old they were.

They stopped playing as it got too dark to keep their amps going, and we got to talking as they put things away.

The guitar player was named Lanval, the bass player Milun, the drummer Guigemar, and the horn player Yonec. These were the kinds of names that were in vogue 17 years ago, it seems. Strange how tastes in these things shift from generation to generation.

Lanval was the most talkative, the most charismatic, of the four. He asked me if I knew any music. Yes, I said, Sure, but just the usual night songs.

Oh, night songs are cool, they said, with the respect of the professional for the amateur. Some of those songs are really good, they said. They go back a long way.

They wanted me to sing, so I sang a few. Wow, we've never heard those before! they said. Where did you learn those?

I'm from the old city, I said.

Wow, northern music! That's like, punk music, metal music, right?

Yes, I said, The first song I sang is an old power ballad, and the second one was a hardcore song.

You screamed it very well, said Lanval, with utmost courtesy.

Thank you, I replied.

So what kind of music do you guys like to listen to?

Oh, we like everything. Around here most of what you hear is funk, and there's nothing wrong with that but—

Another cut in, You have to go down to Southern City sometime. They have all kinds of music. People there take time off work more, so there's always some kind of concert going on during the daytime. One time we were down there and we found some people playing *vaporwave*.

Whoa, I said, what's vaporwave?

It's pretty great, I can't really explain it, it's pretty trippy.

I decided after a few more bits of dialogue that I should go back and check on Ray Ann. Something told me that I would have future opportunities to talk to Lanval, Milun, Guigemar and Yonéc. By the way, did they have a band name?

Yes, we're the Funk Turtles— Yeah, but we're thinking of changing the name— Yeah, it's kind of dumb— It's not dumb, it's like “Funk” — that way people know what kind of music we play — and “amphibian”, like, we're comfortable in any environment...

I let their argument fade as I waved and walked away.

I found myself again in the library. I sat down next to Ray Ann, whose desk lamp just illuminated enough space for her. How is your studying going? I asked her.

Oh, it's fine, she said. I didn't dare ask about the specifics, because the law is far above my comprehension, or my interest — or both; what we do not comprehend does not hold our interest and what does not hold our interest, we do not comprehend.

She leaned back in her chair, into the fainter light, which I suppose was that reflected off the table top. Her face was tired, and not hard, but with a kind of steel to it. I don't know if that quite makes sense, but it's the impression I got looking at her.

We've been talking about going to Southern City. I said. Do you think you'll be able to go along?

She breathed in deeply and breathed out slowly. Maybe, she said. I've really been getting into what I've been studying.

She had a smile on her face, a faint one. Some of this material is really interesting. I think what happened was kind of a wake-up call. I had been losing touch with the law.

It's like the law was a relationship that I wasn't paying attention to — not really. It was becoming a stranger to me, even though we were together every day. Does that make sense?

That's a very poetic way of putting it, yes, it does make sense, I said.

You know, I said, it's been a long time since I really *studied* something, I said. I should find something hard to read, and I can come in with you when you're studying.

But the lamp only lights up a little area, she said.

Up in the north, I said, We know how to modify things. I think if I peel open the shade a bit, we can illuminate more area, although at the expense of the concentration of light.

Oh, I wouldn't want it to be any dimmer than it is, she said. But maybe when I'm studying on the weekend, you can come. That would be nice.

You have to take a break sometime, I said. We all miss you.

It's hard, she said, Being sociable right now.

Maybe if we talked about something that really mattered.

She brightened a little. Really? You would do that for me?

...If we can think of a topic. We laughed. At our age, we knew how hard it was to find a topic that really mattered.

Well, she said, Life is brutal. You guys will have to adapt without me a lot of nights. I need to be with the law.

I understand, I said. We'll do our best. Say, have you eaten dinner yet?

Not really too much, just a snack.

I can bring you dinner. I think tonight it's eggplants and mushrooms.

Sounds good, but I don't think I should eat anything that sloppy near my books.

Well, don't starve yourself!

I'll try not to, she said humbly and perhaps sadly.

By this time, Tony, Elizabeth and Joanna had reconvened in the common room with sandwiches. Tony had his own icebox down in the basement where he would sometimes keep leftovers from his job. They had been making sandwiches that whole time, by flashlight, really creative ones. I told them about Ray Ann and they said Wow, we thought she was too into what she was doing to even think of interrupting. We should make her a sandwich that isn't sloppy. So we made her a peanut butter and cheese sandwich and brought it to her. She looked at us and said, I'm crying a little! Thank you so much. and began to eat, and then turned to read while eating.

And the rest of us returned to the usual common room, and talked of what we had done that day, and of our plan to visit Southern City.

This morning, the whole sky was clouded over and the staticky radio said that it was forecast to be cloudy all day and Class A through C employees would not be asked to go in to work. That included me.

It was dark all day. A lot of people took the occasion to get errands done, or hang out at a deli or restaurant or cafe.

I went down to the bookstore, which was open, and asked the employee what books she would recommend, that were hard books, hard to read.

She recommended a volume of Stephen Ellis poems and an old law book. I looked at the law book and decided to pass on it, then asked if she had anything else. Well, she said, We've got a book of psychology, some child development thing. That might be hard. I looked at it and found that I understood most of what I read but that it was kind of dry. Yes, that should work. I paid and left.

Then I came back to my apartment and my room, remembering that my uncle had left me some books. The one which most interested me was entitled *Uncle Orrville's Headscratchery*, which looked like a humor book. On the cover it showed a cartoon of an older man, with a speech bubble saying Which came first, the chicken or the egg? I thought this might be the perfect counterpart to the other things I was reading.

I took my books down to the library and found Ray Ann, reading by the light of her lamp. It wasn't so dark that I

couldn't read, my eyes were going to be fine, so I sat down next to her and plowed through some material.

It felt good. I hadn't done any really challenging reading since I read Yevgeny Yepanchin's classic novel *The Beast*.

And that was several years ago. I'm really not sure how I let this aspect of my life get away from me, since there were still good libraries in the old city and I'd spent quite a bit of time unemployed. What had I done with my time, anyway?

I couldn't really remember, that was of a distant time, more than a month ago. I knew if I really thought I could dig up memories of me doing something: walking the streets?

skulking with confederates? watching movies all day? — but I had better things to do at the moment.

When I got done with a brutally dry chapter of the psychology text, I turned to the Ellis book. The first poem started out like this:

I—

I—

I?

densitydensitydensity

whichistosaythatalli'veeverbeenis

idon'tbuildestercomebackherei'mtalkingevilisevil-
isevilisquitewelli'veneverso?

And it went on basically like that for 16 more stanzas. I had to copy that out in my diary just to try to maybe understand it. There's something in there that speaks to me, that opening part in particular, I'm just not sure what it is. Maybe if I spend more time with it, I'll understand.

As I was reading the Ellis book, I found a funny poem, well, a poem that had a funny part, and I laughed out loud, quietly. Ray Ann noticed and I had to read the line to her. She began to smile.

I told her about the old law book I'd seen at the book store. She nodded. I wouldn't read an out-of-date law book if I were you. There's too many new laws to keep up with for you to be going back to the old stuff.

But I'm not a law student, I contradicted.

I know, she said, But you can pursue something that you're more passionate about instead.

And I looked at the books that I had, and realized that I wasn't really passionate about any of them. Well, I hadn't read the headscratchery book yet — but I didn't expect to find anything that would really call to my heart in that. Yet — there it was. So as Ray Ann had already turned back to her texts, I looked at it.

It had all kinds of sayings in it, a lot of them old timey or agricultural. The slower I read them, the more profound they seemed. Which really did come first? I began to ask myself, Really, which came first, the *chicken*, or the *egg*? If you cut

off a cow's leg, it's still a cow, right? But what if you cut off all the legs? And if you keep cutting it apart? At what point is it no longer a cow? These things were profound and absorbing, but I had to laugh sometimes.

Ray Ann wanted to know what was so funny.

Okay, here's one:

—The greatest hornswoggler is the one who says that there are hornswoggles.—

What does that even mean? she asked.

I don't know! I said and we laughed.

After that my brain was full — too much! So I said to Ray Ann, I think I'll go see if I can find any books in my room, out of what my uncle left me. And she said, Your uncle would definitely have interesting books. How well did you know him? I asked.

Not too well. He was nice, but we didn't talk much. But he had a different way of looking at things.

How so?

I don't know, he seemed to get sad more than most people. He would say his sentences a different way, he could really look a person in the eye. I mean, it's not like anyone has trouble looking anyone in the eye — some people, like

Justin, are too good at it — but it was like he could look you in the eye in a different way.

How interesting, I said. Well, I'll be back in a little bit.

And I went back to my room, and shined my flashlight on my books until I found a novel that looked interesting. Then I went back down to the library and showed Ray Ann what I got.

This looks nice and thick.

Yeah, she said, Hey, if you ever run out of books, maybe you can try reading a law book. It might be nice to be able to talk to someone about the law.

I felt something inside, I felt honored by what she suggested, and like something special had just been acknowledged to exist between us. At the moment it was just a feeling, I was sure, but then, feelings can be real.

I said back to her, Okay, yeah, I could do that. Sure. And I looked her in the eye, but, I was sure, not in a special way like my uncle, just the ordinary way, and nodded, and turned back to my novel.

And after an hour of that, I was done reading for the day, but she just kept plugging away, and I went outside to go for a walk, stretch my legs, think about the rest of the day.

I thought about my job. It wasn't bad, but I wondered if the way I leaned over the assembly line was going to catch up

with me someday. I wasn't sure there was a more ergonomic way to do it, although perhaps if I asked one of my fellow workers, they'd know something. Well, if that fell through, I could probably find another job. Maybe I could work at Tony's deli, if there was an opening.

Speaking of Tony's deli, I was getting pretty hungry, so I walked over there and ordered a sandwich. I got something vegetarian, as was my habit, and he said, when there was a lull in the customers, Hey, Paul, want to try some meat?

Well, I said, Sure, why not. He got me a little piece of barbecued beef.

I took a bite and chewed and swallowed.

Well, he said, How do you like it?

Hm. I said.

Well. I said.

The other day when you said it was like mushrooms, like the difference between vegetables and mushrooms, but different than mushrooms, you were right. That's how it is.

Do you like it? he asked.

It's okay. I think I'll stick to vegetarian food though. There's something about it that says You don't have to eat this.

Interesting, he said. Okay. How do you like your sandwich?

It's good. I said. It's filling and nutritious.

Good to hear! he said. Another satisfied customer.

How's business? I asked.

Oh, it's pretty good, I don't really know why, exactly, but I'll take it.

Well, maybe it's word of mouth.

Yeah, it's probably the word of mouth. That would probably explain it.

After eating, I said goodbye to Tony and went out and remembered something. I learned about about it during the news hour yesterday at work. It was about this ongoing reality play they were doing on cloudy days a few stops away by train. I decided to see if I could learn something about it. It sounded like something fun. It was called New City's Next Piece of Poop. I asked a co-worker about it as we waited for the train, and she said something like they eliminated a contestant each time they met. If you survived to the end, you lost. The contestants tried to act "poopy" to each other and a panel of 5 year olds would judge their behavior to determine who was the poopiest. Then that person would be eliminated. She was excited about it, and I was excited about it. When does it happen? I asked. I think it's on cloudy days only, because they can't afford the rent for a weekend slot.

Ha, that sounds low-rent!

I know!

I asked and she told me the name of the theater, which I remembered from a previous walk in the city.

And now today I walked up to the box office, hoping I hadn't missed the show. But there was no one there. It turned out that the show was on the weekends after all. I saw a young woman inside the theater and asked her about New City's Next Piece of Poop and she said, Oh, yeah, they used to meet on cloudy days but they've been doing good so they took a weekend slot. I asked her how much tickets were and she told me, and it sounded actually very reasonable to me.

Oh yeah, she said, We try to keep it reasonable here at this theater. We want to respect the fact that people work hard and don't always make that much money, something which we ourselves understand very well.

We laughed a little at that and then I left, and took the train back home, and just hung around for a while. I ran into Elizabeth in the courtyard. She was just sitting, staring at the fountain of the woman pouring water on the child.

You know, she said to me, I've been wondering if maybe I should get into making fountains. There seems to be a good market for them. I mean, every apartment building has a few somewhere or other. I was over in the one next door, not since after what happened, but a few weeks ago, and they had one in the office, the sunroom, and three in the

courtyard. It takes an artistic eye, but I think I might be able to learn.

Well, you'd probably have to move down to Southern City. I hear that's where all the artistic stuff is in this city.

Well, that's somewhat true, but not completely true. It's true that I would want to go down there a lot more often. But it's fun down there. You'll see when we head down there this weekend.

Oh yeah, I said, That will be cool.

By the way, you mentioned that the neighboring building has a sunroom. Does our building have a sunroom?

Yeah, do you want to see it?

Yeah, sure.

So we went to a stairwell at the corner of the building, the farthest corner from where I lived, which might explain why I hadn't come across it yet, and climbed all the way to the top floor, and walked a little down the corridor and found a large alcove, as big as a room, with one wall containing large windows looking out at the apartment building next door (not Justin's apartment building). The roof was a domed skylight, with stained glass and clear glass. The space had white couches and was on the warm side.

Here it is. She said. Our sunroom.

We sat for a little bit, and for some reason we were quiet, perhaps for having nothing to say.

Then Elizabeth got out her sketchbook. Hey, I said, I remember seeing someone in the courtyard sketching, earlier.

Today?

No, it was a while ago. She looked like she was 20 years old. Have you ever run into her?

Yeah, I have. Her name is Constance.

Is she a university student?

Yes, she is. She's not an art student, though. She's studying to be an accountant.

How interesting, I said. Accounting is a headache, and art is much nicer.

Yeah, I suppose so. Accounting? Did I say that? I think it was something else. No, wait, it was accounting, but it's not money accounting, it's *accounting* accounting.

Oh, I see. I said. Well, that's pretty cool. Do you talk to her much?

Not a lot. Just now and then.

Okay, nice.

I saw her sketching something.

Hey, what are you sketching?

You, she replied, and showed me part of my face.

How nice, I said. Could you spare a piece of paper?

Sure, she said.

And on an end table I sketched on the paper with my ballpoint pen some kind of sketch of her, or perhaps of a number of other people in the world.

Very nice, she said. Maybe we can have an art show up here in the sunroom sometime. I think people would really like something like that.

Interesting. I said. Well, at least I'll come.

She laughed. Participants in the show definitely have to come, to make sure their work doesn't get stolen.

We laughed.

And by then we were hungry and rejoined the others and spent the evening as we usually did, except missing Ray Ann.

The next day I went to work. Ho hum.

When I got home, I walked the halls and chanced to run into Yonec.

Hey, are you guys playing a show anytime soon?

Oh hey, man! Yeah, we want to, but, the thing is, we don't have a following yet.

I wondered at this. How can you get a following if you can't play anywhere?

That's what we were trying to figure out!

Anyway. He continued. If you want to hear us, we're practicing in a little bit. I'll send you a buzz when we start setting up. Maybe you can be our first fan.

Hey, I like your guys' sound. I'd be honored.

I went back to my room and got my cell phone, and realized that I hadn't got it set up to use the New City phone network. So I went to the computer room and paid for some laptop time and got that all taken care of. Network stuff is always so weird, so unreal. But after a few minutes I got used to it, and got my phone set up in time to text my number to Yonec and then get the buzz back from him.

I went over and enjoyed some funk music, and after they got through their songs, they said, Hey man, can you play any

instruments? And I said No.

But you can sing, so you can definitely play *something*. Try the drums.

So I sat down and tried something basic, but my timing wasn't the best. Okay how about the guitar? Lanval offered. And I tried playing, tried remembering the old chords I used to know, but it wasn't working out. Okay, said Milun, Try the bass. But that didn't go much better. Yonec would have offered to let me play his trombone, he said, but he only had one mouthpiece.

It's okay, man, they said. You're a good singer.

Thanks. I said.

And then they started talking among themselves about school. It sounded more or less like the kind of things I remembered from my high school days: stupid things people said or did, with or without realizing they were stupid, teachers who were boring, tests and homework which were an affliction, once in a blue moon a reference to something cool they learned in school, and gossip about girls and guys, and then just talking about girls.

It turned out Lanval had a crush on someone. They figured this out somehow. They wanted to know who it was, but he was reticent to say.

Now why would Lanval not want to say? Said Guigemar. Is she ugly?

No! On my honor! Said Lanval.

Is she too young? Said Yonec.

'Swounds, no! Said Lanval.

Is she too old? Said Milun.

At this Lanval hesitated, and they had their scent of blood.

She's older? Is she a senior?

He looked evasive.

She's a senior, isn't she?

Is she Guilliadun!

No!

Is she Guildeluec?

No!

Is it Meriaduc?

No! Certainly not. Upon my word, it's neither a girl in the grades below me nor in the grades above me at school!

Oh, they said, their eyes growing big. An *older woman*.

At this, I began to be a little bit interested.

Do we know her?

He hesitated.

We know her!

Does she live in this building?

He hesitated again.

Ho! They said. What ho! Okay, now that we've established *that...*

Okay, I can see that this trial by questioning will not cease, I know that I have lost, he said, with artistic dignity. I will tell you her name.

The room grew as silent as the grave.

Constance.

This increased my interest level even a bit more, perhaps now I was truly interested. Three years really is quite the age gap, assuming that he was 17 and she was 20.

Have you talked to her?

Yes, he said, truthfully but with an evasive manner. One time I complimented her on her drawing. She's an amazing artist.

Really, the others said, with a newfound respect. An older woman, who's good at sketching.

Does she go to university?

Yes, she goes to university.

What does she study?

She's studying to be an accountant. An *accountant* accountant.

Their eyes grew big. An accountant? And an artist? Their friend Lanval would have a hard road ahead of him, a tall mountain to climb, many rivals to fend off, much practicing to do, they started to clear their schedules (somehow) so that they could make this amazing Event, this universe-ennobling Relationship, be brought forth into existence — well, this is what I imagine them thinking, and soon enough they really were talking about getting more serious with their playing. They said, You need to sing better, Lanval, if you want to impress Constance. And he said, You need to play better, then I can sing better. And they said, Then you need to find us better songs to play — or even write some better songs. And he said Fine, you're on. And they said Fine back.

Soon enough, Lanval realized that in me he had a great resource of information about how to relate to older women. He couldn't tell exactly how old I was, but he knew that I

had long ago left university. I must be a very experienced man.

What do you think I should do to win the love of Constance?
he said.

Well, you have to be trustworthy, and then wait for her to trust you.

Yes, I'm definitely going to be trustworthy.

But you have to realize, that trust is something that people give when they're ready. And sometimes, it doesn't matter how trustworthy you are, the other person just doesn't feel trust. Trust is a mystery. You just have to let it grow. You have to make a space for it, and it will come — or it won't.

Yeah, I understand that, he said.

I hoped that he did. Maybe he was old for his years.

And we went on our merry way.

As I ate dinner that night, I related what happened, with Tony, Joanna, and Elizabeth. None of them knew Constance any better than Elizabeth did. I had to talk about it because I started to feel a kind of concern for Constance. I wondered what her perspective would be. And Joanna spoke up.

She probably just wants to live her life. But somehow she's become famous to him. It could be a good thing for them to hang out. But it might not be. He's young, he hasn't

worked out everything. He could develop different ways, there's more danger and possibility in him at his age. Keep an eye on him.

I thought this sounded like a good idea.

22.

I didn't sleep well last night, and as I was regaining consciousness this morning, it finally hit me what had happened to Ray Ann.

My mind expanded her few words into the real situation, what she really experienced. I felt the evil of the situation, I felt what it was like to be Justin, and as I was waking up I couldn't move fast enough to get away from that imagination.

Because of the clouds this week, and the high volume of recyclables, I had to go in to work even though it was the weekend. I went to work feeling a burning within me and everything seemed irrelevant. I was able to do my job, but it was an effort to call out with the fellow workers during the news hour, and I didn't want to talk to my co-worker about reality theater. I took the train home and wondered what good this feeling was, this burning. How would it help Ray Ann if I suffered? I decided I would stop feeling it and get back to practical things. But I couldn't stop feeling it.

When I got home, I lay down in my room and couldn't really sleep. I didn't want to be part of any reality, I didn't even

want to face Ray Ann — I wasn't sure talking to her would be a good thing, I thought it would be better for her to initiate conversations about what happened.

I lay down and then eventually got up, and somehow the feeling receded, but did not fully go away. I was able to hang out with my friends.

But now, as I'm going to bed for the night, I can sense it lurking, perhaps returning in full form.

This is something that happens to me from time to time, and I've learned to just ride out such a feeling. But maybe in this case there's something I shouldn't just ride out. Justin walks free, for instance. I don't know why, but that bothers me now in a way it didn't before. (He's out on bail. Ray Ann has a court date, about 6 weeks from now.) My worry is not that he will rape someone else, or bother Ray Ann (although it could be), but that he won't be convicted. But, I don't think there's anything I can do to help convict him. That's not my competence and I can't think of what I would do even incompetently.

23.

Today, I felt windblown but a little less strongly affected by what happened. I even spent some time with Ray Ann. It was fine. I was avoiding her, but when I actually spent time with her, it was fine. We were in a different reality when we were together, I guess it was like, we were in reality. Maybe

when we're apart, we're in the same unreality, at least, when I'm unmoored about Justin.

The others went to Southern City in the morning, but I wasn't in the mood. I'll have to go some other time. Instead I went for a walk, found a monument (a 20-foot-tall statue of some old hero riding a horse), and a public park along the ravine, several miles from where we live. There's a cut where an old gully used to intersect the ravine, so you can walk down the gully bed down into the ravine itself. As long as it's not raining, of course. There were people picnicking both up above and down below. There was a small stream in the ravine bottom, with a piece of trash or two by the side.

It was nice, it was a beautiful day, I could feel something in the air, probably the altitude, which made me feel excited, on edge, positive, but this was an overlay over my troubled spirit.

I went home and tried to read with Ray Ann, but my mind couldn't focus on reading, so I just went out and sat in the courtyard and tried to breathe. I breathed in slowly and then even more slowly breathed out. I managed to relax, although I couldn't get much else done besides breathing. I stayed out until after dark, and saw the thick host of stars above, once the sky had gone all the way dark. And this vision entered me and stood beside me, but I was still unmoored, it was asserting an eternal reality, but I was still where I was.

I went inside and Tony, Elizabeth, and Joanna were back from Southern City. Ray Ann was with them, and we all talked about their trip to Southern City. It sounds like a

really interesting place, I'll have to visit it myself someday soon.

Tonight, as I prepare to go to sleep, I feel a little bit more at peace than I did last night. My mind is a little bit less prone to thinking of the horror of what happened, that horror in the mind that has a life of its own.

24.

I woke up this morning aching all over, although I don't feel as much of the emotional burning as I did yesterday and the day before. I went to work and got into the flow of it with a kind of anger, and then grew tired. I felt a kind of transcendent feeling, like I was walking into a wind of tedium. One time I went to a concert of advanced jazz music, and I remember the horn players leaning hard on their dissonant notes, to the point where I leaned hard on the dissonance, too, rested my body against it. That's what work was like today, it was hell.

I came home and found Ray Ann in a funk. She was getting to the point where the words she was reading weren't really registering in her mind.

If I weren't working, and you weren't going to school, I said, I would say we should go somewhere tomorrow, like Southern City. But it's the first day of the week, it's a long way to when we can really plan an escape.

And I told her how I felt, and she said, Paul, thank you for caring so much, but please, what good does it do if you feel my pain?

And I didn't know the answer to that. There didn't seem to be a point to pain, it just happened. And I felt some of what she felt, or at least a representation, based on the same act of horror.

So I tried letting go of the pain that I felt.

Try breathing, she said, Slowly in and even more slowly out.

I tried what she suggested, and she tried what she suggested. Then we started to meet eyes as we breathed in sync, as we breathed loudly, which made us laugh.

I have an idea, something that's fun, she said. Let's have a contest to see who can hold their breath the longest.

So we did that for a while, sitting there in the library, with her books lying open and her papers scattered on the table, my volume of Uncle Orrville unopened. I won the contest, but I'm sure given time she could best the mark that I left.

She packed up all her stuff, then, and went off to the common room to be with the others, and I followed her there.

You two have been spending a lot of time together, they seemed to just then notice.

We laughed at that and sat down, and as it got really dark we talked about what to do that weekend. I suggested going to see an episode of New City's Next Piece of Poop, but that was declared to be uninteresting by all the rest. They had grown up on New City reality theater and grown out of it, I suppose, while I certainly hadn't. But I really wanted to go. So I decided to go on my own, or if I could, with my coworker. And everyone else, Ray Ann included, made firm-enough plans to go to Southern City on the first day of the weekend.

Having decided that, we had a breath-holding competition. Joanna won, but of course she did, because she swims on her days off.

But I must say, after all of that, there's still a part of me that is solemn, there is still a candle if not a torch of pain, but tonight I am at rest.

25.

This morning I woke up balanced and quiet, went to work, had a steady day, a "clean" day, to speak in the terminology of advanced jazz, and came home and found Ray Ann back at work, and I brought my books over and sat with her. We were quiet for a few hours, each of us absorbed in our reading, when Elizabeth came in.

Do you mind if I join you? she asked.

Of course, said Ray Ann, gesturing to a chair. Not at all, I said, shifting my stack of books to make more space for her.

She sat very carefully sketching designs of fountains. And I kept reading my difficult books, one after another, and Ray Ann kept going over her law books, trying to work out all the consistencies which hid behind apparent inconsistencies.

Then, it started to get dim and then dark, and we all took a break. Ray Ann had come to the decision that she would work while it was day and relax while it was night time, at least until she got her energy back.

I marveled to myself at how driven she was, and said so, and Elizabeth looked at me funny, I could tell though it was getting dark, and Ray Ann said, Maybe I'm driven, but I *like* to work, working is fun. I need work.

When I was young, I said, I had a pet rat. I had to give the rat wood to chew. Is that what you're like?

A rodent? Yes, exactly! I'm like a rodent.

Elizabeth looked at us in a kind of smug way, having made up her mind — or... I could be mistaken, it was dim.

Tony was promoting his business, so instead of having barley and mushrooms and chard for dinner, he treated everyone who came down for dinner to sandwiches. They were delicious, and he made a few new friends. I saw Jennifer enjoying a hummus, cheese, and spinach sandwich. She noticed me and we said hi, although both of us, at our ages,

weren't so good at remembering much about each other besides our faces, names, and a friendly vibe.

In the common room, at night, we recited poetry. Elizabeth knew a lot, having had a phase where she memorized a lot. Joanna didn't know much. Tony knew one which went like this:

I'm standing in the understanding
Of the way in which your lips say hello
My heart is turned to wax, rocks and jello
My fate is sealed, you who cursed my life
You who blessed my life, you who taught me peace and strife
I will never feel
The way I used to
When I see your street
Or see the brand of your favorite beer
in the ads on the train
You stole my brain
You tramp
You vagabond
Possessing me
Though you are far, far away
And never think of me
Anymore

We liked that poem, all the rest of us did.

Up where I'm from, in the old city, we aren't as much into poetry. So instead I recited lyrics from the old songs, like Jackknife Lawrence's classic punk song:

I wanna drive my car
I wanna drive my car to Elvaunt
I wanna drive over your grave
I wanna drive my car
I wanna drive the slave
I wanna drive my car

I wanna be a friend
I wanna drive my car
I wanna talk to you
I wanna get with you

I wanna drive my car
I wanna drive my car

I tried to make it interesting, the way I delivered it, even though it was meant more to be sung.

Ray Ann didn't know any poems or songs. She knew the names of a few, and could sing the beginnings but not the rest of various songs, but no more. I think of the five of us, she had the least experience with art, and the least experience with manual labor, those two places where you tend to learn songs and poems. Joanna didn't know as many songs because at her job, she was kind of like a hunter, always looking for someone broken down on the side of the street.

Then it was time for us to go to bed.

This morning, I woke up dead tired, for whatever reason, and it was a marvel that I got my body out of bed and dressed and off to work. I felt like there was no point to anything, no future. I get this way sometimes, just this feeling that there's nothing to do and that the whole world is fading away. It's a strange feeling that I assume has nothing to do with reality, so I just try to live through it. Along about 3PM, finally, after hours of alienated work, the feeling started to lift, and I found myself almost recovered by the time I made it home to the apartment building.

Not too much of interest happened at the apartment.

Everyone else was feeling tired so they went to bed early, even Ray Ann. I've been sitting up trying to pass the time, a bit concerned that I'm getting into one of those phases where I stay up later each night and have a hard time waking up in the morning. I don't think I'm naturally the kind of person to keep a regular schedule. Sometimes it's harder than other times, sometimes it's easier than other times.

27.

Same thing at work as yesterday, except that I started feeling better a little earlier in the day.

Nothing much happened tonight at the apartment. I talked to Ray Ann about going with me and my co-worker to New City's Next Piece of Poop this weekend. She seemed amused but declined.

28.

Went to work, it went better. I was seated next to the reality theater fan at work and we eventually got to talking about reality theater, and finally made firm plans to see Piece of Poop on the weekend. Some of our co-workers overheard our conversation and made derisive comments about reality theater and Piece of Poop. But somehow we knew that we were making the right decision.

I came home and hung out with the Funk Turtles (that was still their name) and then in an odd mood went out to the courtyard where I saw Constance (it was still fairly light out) sitting by herself at a little table, with a sketchbook out but obviously not sketching.

I went up to her and introduced myself. I said I was new at the complex and she said, Oh yeah, I've seen you around a little bit. You inherited your uncle's apartment, right? And I said, Yes, that's correct. And she said, Very nice. You must save a nice amount of money that way. Yeah, I said, it makes things a bit easier. I have some savings, and I think otherwise I might not. And she said, You have to watch where your money goes. If you're careful, you can do something really good with your money.

And I said, I heard you're studying accounting.

Yeah, I study accounting.

What's that like?

Well, so far we've been taking classes in financial accounting, actually. It's kind of like pre-accounting, like pre-law or pre-medicine. So I've been thinking a lot about savings. But I am taking one higher-level class on actual accounting, like nutrient measurement. That's been cool. I like working with data.

You have to be really careful, right?

Yeah, it depends on what we're measuring. Some resources, like phosphorus, have a narrower margin of sustainability than others. Others, like germanium, are scarce but not as essential for life. There are others that are essential for life, but which we have in relative abundance, like magnesium. We can just get that from seawater, no problem. There are some which are essential for life but which are very abundant, like nitrogen, which we don't even track.

What about water?

Sometimes we've tracked that. It depends on the climate patterns. The last 20 years down here we've had more snowfall in the mountains, so we haven't had to worry about that as much.

So when you graduate, what kind of job will you do? I mean, you'll be an accountant, but what will you do?

I might not start out as an accountant, more as a data collector. It depends on where they post me. I might work

with a large company to do internal auditing. Companies like to know if they're wasting resources. Or I might work completely in the public sector. I'm not really sure where I see myself. I could even end up going into auditing apartment buildings.

I would think there wouldn't be many resources that weren't tied up in the building.

That's true, but there are a lot of apartment buildings, so it can add up.

Basically you go through the trash?

Or sometimes when a particular resource is low, we see if we can get some out of things people have lying around but don't really need.

What about recycling?

Yeah, that's a possibility. Recycling plants are important. Maybe an electronics plant.

I work at a regular recycling plant.

Oh, interesting. Are you interested in resource conservation?

No, well, I guess I was before I started working there, but I just got the job because I needed a job. Do electronics recycling jobs pay more?

It's a different kind of work. You have to disassemble the things you're working with, to do pre-sorting. It can be a bit more dangerous than regular recycling. After pre-sorting, they tend to melt all the metals down and then kind of precipitate out the different kinds of metal. That's its own thing.

Why don't they melt it all down in the first place?

They want to minimize the amount of plastic that gets vaporized. You have to get the metal as separate as possible. Also, sometimes it's possible to save some electricity if you know that some batch of devices doesn't contain a high-melting-point metal, or metals.

How would I go about getting a job at an electronics plant?

How much experience do you have sorting?

Not too much, just a few weeks.

Okay, they tend to want to see a few years of experience, just as a filter on applicants.

Okay. What about funeral accounting?

That's an interesting line of work. Yeah, I might get into that. I really don't know about any of this.

Does it matter what kind of position you get?

Not too much. The fundamentals of accounting are the same. The devices we use to measure resources can be different, though. And in different circumstances you work with different kinds of people.

Interesting.

And we talked about a few other things. I found her to be mature for her age. I wondered why she was staring off into space back when I approached her, but didn't ask. Maybe staring off into space is how some people become mature for their age.

Then I went inside and sat with Ray Ann for a while, then had dinner, a bit late, then, still in an odd mood, I went up in the dark to the sunroom and looked up through the stained glass. I could see the stars through the colored glass. I lay back on the couch and let myself entirely relax, feeling all the cells in my body, I guess.

In this state, I felt a sense of gratitude emerge within me.

The gratitude was over to one side in me, it was a feeling I was having, it was not something that overcame me, truly. I did not become my gratitude. But I had some gratitude, I had some kind of feeling. As alien as the feeling was to me, it was mine. And in a bare, faint way, I felt as though I had accomplished something by having had this experience.

This is one of those loose threads of my life, a thread I guess I could pull on, if I wanted: what would it be like to become a feeling, rather than simply to come into possession of it?

And then in quieter, normal gratitude, I laughed a little and was content with my life.

Feeling sleepy, I've written the preceding, and tried to go to bed, but I couldn't sleep, so I got up and wrote this much more.

29.

Woke up earlier than necessary, feeling a little on edge.
Went to work, floated through it, still on edge.

Felt that feeling dissipate once I got home and took a walk.

Hung out with Tony, Elizabeth, Joanna, and Ray Ann. Ray Ann was taking a little break from studying. She said she was really enjoying studying, she said that she could really get somewhere if this energy kept up. We were polite and supportive, but wondered.

Everyone but me was looking forward to going to Southern City tomorrow. But I was looking forward to New City's Next Piece of Poop.

I'm feeling tired early tonight, and I think I'll sleep well.

30.

I woke up at just the right time, exactly when my alarm went off, and I was truly awake. I went down to the dining room and ate some breakfast, which was a large bowl of oatmeal and an egg, something that would keep me full. I liked

eggs, now that I was in the New City, although I only liked to have them occasionally. They were significantly more expensive than beans.

Then I spent the morning walking around the city. I ended up in the West Quarter, somehow, having turned and walked in an unexpected way for a long time, and thought a stray thought about the woman with the brown hair.

The West Quarter had a different look to it than where I lived. The streets were laid out in curves and cul-de-sacs. My neighborhood was laid out in an attempt to keep to a grid, except where the ravine interfered.

In the West Quarter, I found a very nice vegetarian restaurant, something which reminded me of the old city. I had some spaghetti with olives, tahini, yogurt, and fresh, delicious tomatoes. I wondered where the tomatoes came from. I felt a stirring of interest in agriculture.

Then I took the train back, to make it home faster.

It was getting to be about time to get ready to go to the show. I took a shower and got dressed, then caught the train to my co-worker's stop. She got on. She was wearing makeup, which for a second alienated her from me, and then made her look more attractive. Soon after, as she talked, her personality came more to the fore, and her appearance, although present, was off to the side. We sat side-by-side and talked about what wonders we were going to see. I wondered what the "poopy behavior" would look like. She reassured me that every time, the behavior was different.

People are amazing, she said. They can make a lot out of one particular theme. You ever read history?

Yes, I said, Sometimes.

People are amazing.

I agreed and we had a pleasant time of it. Soon we got off and stood in line and bought our tickets and went inside and took our seats. It was about 5PM.

The audience was composed of many different people. There were people dressed in the Southern City fashion. There were whole families from, perhaps, the West Quarter, from the family-sized apartments I saw lining the cul-de-sacs there.

A mom sat nearby us with her son and I supposed his best friend, or at least, a friend. Friendship works in interesting ways for some children, as though a *best* friend is merely *a* friend.

My co-worker talked about parenthood: Someday I'm going to be a mom just like her. It'll be great. I'm sure it'll be hard, too. But can you imagine being able to take your child to see something? Your child can see things for the *first time*. You can show them the good things.

My co-worker was speaking loud enough for me to hear, but not loud enough for the mom to hear. I replied quietly: Yeah, I don't know if fatherhood is for me or not. We'll see.

Oh, she said, Of course, you have plenty of time to figure all of that out. You must be older than me, but you're not that old.

I told her my age.

Yeah, see, you have time.

The children were not so circumspect with their voices, and we heard their 6-year-old chatter.

My dad can make anything, said one. He can make houses, and boats, and furniture. But not when he's in pain.

My dad is always in pain. But he can make me anything. I just have to ask him nicely.

How adorable, I said to my co-worker, To hear such innocent people play-act at, what is, after all, potentially a very pooppy sentiment.

Yes, she said. You're right.

A dramatic electric organ began to play, a horn section joined in, and then at the climax everything cut out, the audience quieting, and an amplified double bass played the show's theme, unaccompanied, and the master of ceremonies cut in with a warm and welcoming Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the one and only show where the ones who win, are the losers, where the ones who lose, are the winners, and where *adults* are judged by young children.

That's right, you're about to witness the further saga of the el-ec-tion and de-terr-mination of New City's Next Piece of Poop! That's right, he said, as the audience went wild, Put your hands together!

Last week on New City's Next Piece of Poop...

Actors jumped to the stage and reenacted the highlights of last week.

These aren't the contestants, my co-worker whispered in my ear, surprising me, But they are dressed to look like the contestants.

I nodded.

The last bit was the cliffhanger ending, when all was halted and a selection was made, and New City's still-most-recent Piece of Poop put on the brown suit and was eliminated from the competition.

And now... continued the MC, Unfreezing their inimical animosities and vile vibes... Your ill-behaved contestants!

And the contestants took their places on stage, and the scene unfroze. Tense music began, there was drama, betrayal, grumpiness, pettiness. The audience roared with laughter, over and over. There were voice-overs and commercial breaks and recapitulations. The whole thing moved to a climax of poopiness and then, just as everything seemed to collapse, as we thought we couldn't take any more of the vile vibes and inimical animosities, the stage

went pitch black, and then the lights came up and the judges came to the stage, from where they had been sitting in the front row.

And now, intoned the MC, Our panel of Five-Year-Olds! will judge the merits of the various contestants, and one of them will be sent home with their very own brown suit and — this week — \$250 for their troubles!

They set up an area mic for the five-year-olds, who duly discussed, with a certain amount of focusing provided by the MC, the merits of each of the contestants. Finally, but not too much later, they came to the point of decision, and each laboriously wrote his or her vote on a piece of paper. The Show Accountant carefully tabulated the results and then the MC announced that New City! In a minute, your Next Piece of Poop!

The music played.

The contestants were nowhere to be seen during the conferral, and were brought out on stage for the final confrontation by this week's 5-year-old Chief of the Court.

One by one, each of the contestants was discussed, pardoned, and allowed more time to develop, and their faces were a bit disappointed.

Next week they only get \$200 if they get eliminated, whispered my co-worker.

Finally, it was down to two, to the poopiest two, and the judge lingered over the decision, dramatic music building quietly from the organ and the violins.

Rafael, said the Chief of Court, pronouncing the “I” more as a “w”, You were very rude to Annalisa when you told her she was stupid. And you were also manipulative in trying to get Jeremy to give up his trading cards when you were eating lunch.

Dramatic music, pausing.

He turns to Annalisa.

Annalisa. He said.

You were really foul when you implied that Rafael didn’t know how to not pee when he was scared and that’s why his pants were wet, even though you knew that they were wet because Jeremy threw water at him.

And then you told George that he was quote a stupid clown who should go out to the country to be with the animals where he comes from, unquote.

You also stole \$1,000 that the group was going to donate to a charity for little sick children, as part of the charity challenge. We caught you doing that. We saw that.

Rafael.

He said.

You were also really mean to George when he didn't know the answer to the question during the school challenge. You said, quote, Are you smarter than Jeremy? No. You're not even smarter than the judges of this show. Unquote. For insulting young people and implying that they're stupid, and for all your other offenses, you...

Dramatic music.

Are going to be left to develop in the bowels of this show. Annalisa, put on the brown suit, you are New City's Next Piece of Poop!

Stage hands ceremoniously arrested her and took her backstage to put on the brown suit. Music played while a large slide was brought out in front of the stage. Annalisa returned and climbed the steps of the slide, then slid down and emerged in the center aisle. The Chief of Court said, Annalisa! You have been eliminated!

She was crying to receive the \$250 check.

I was in pain from laughing, and as I left with my co-worker, I couldn't imagine having a better time in my entire life. I knew that if I came back, it wouldn't be as amazing, but I was certainly willing to come back.

We caught the late train back to her place, unable to express all of the feelings and energies that had been stored up in us from that amazing experience, in the time we had together.

See you at work! I said as she got off the train. Yeah, see you! she called out to me, with a fresh face.

I got home as late as I could, the light dying from the sky, and met up with the others who had recently themselves returned from Southern City.

You have a glow, said Elizabeth, Did you have a good time with your co-worker?

Yeah! That show was amazing!

And I was about to describe the show, but then caught myself and said, You just have to see it yourself. Next week. We should all go, with my co-worker.

Oh, is he cool? Asked Elizabeth.

She, yes, she is cool.

And everyone looked at me, and then looked at each other.

So that's where the glow came from... said Elizabeth.

I laughed. No way! The show is where the glow comes from. You have to see it to believe it.

They all laughed. Okay, you're on, said Joanna. We'll see what this co-worker and this reality theater really look like.

Next week? I said.

Next week. she said.

And we went on our merry way.

31.

I got up early in the morning, full of extra life, and found myself unexpectedly confronted with the sight of the Funk Turtles rubbing their eyes and eating their breakfast in the dining room. I realized from my surprise at seeing them that these young fellows were always reluctant to be up.

I asked Lanval what they were up to. He said, Southern City. Wanna come?

And of course I did. I must have woken up early for some worthy purpose.

We got the train, made the transfer, caught the other train, and found ourselves close to the end of the line, every station we passed getting closer to the foothills that make a hard limit to New City's southern extent. We saw way up on one of the hills the Southern X, a famous landmark I recognized from postcards. We could smell on the wind the smell of burning sagebrush. It is the custom of Southern City people to cook using the brush that grows on the slopes of the foothills.

The architecture in Southern City was much more interesting and random than that of our neighborhood. In our

neighborhood, stateliness at best and monotony at worst were the aesthetics, but here there were numerous decorative elements that were unnecessary: ironworking, terra cotta figures, the sun, moon, stars, and clouds in iron and terra cotta, murals, flowerbeds, censers full of burning incense, balconies, sails, flags, treehouses, houses made to look like castles, houses made to look like palaces, despite being small, one house made to look like a lion's roaring head, a house that devoured its visitors.

It seemed that most people lived in houses, rather than in massive apartment buildings, and most houses had yards.

Dirt from the yards would spill out onto the sidewalk, which wasn't always in the best condition. People clogged the streets on their bicycles, and in the little plazas there were pushcart vendors. I looked and looked and couldn't find any permanent commercial structures. It seems that everything, more or less, was bought and sold in the streets.

I wondered aloud what it would be like if there was some kind of item, some special item, which was only available some of the time because the vendor happened to be at some other plaza when you needed it.

A Southern Citizen overheard me and joined in with conversation. Ay, 'tis a question many of ye ask, you tourists of the core city.

Well, and I've just moved there from the old city, I added.

Ay, a stranger all the more! Well, I will tell thee, stranger: we have learned that whenever we really need something, we

can find it, and that which is special to us is something which we can do without in the moment. What is special is simply that which we love so dearly that we are grateful to have it when we can have it. It is valuable at all times.

Well said, I said, I think that in that I could be a Southern Citizen.

Forsooth, said the Southerner, Anyone can be a Citizen.

Let's go find some concerts, conferred Lanval with Milun, Yonec and Guigemar.

I said Goodbye to the Southerner, who said Farewell to me, and we turned our ears to see if we could hear any of the famous Southern music playing. Of course the Turtles chattered about anything, everything, and nothing, but they would stop themselves every few blocks, turn their ears to the wind, and discern, or think they discerned, some new kind of aural enchantment.

At one point Yonec was pretty certain that he heard some vaporwave. So we trotted over a few buildings down and saw in the front yard of a house a sound system with a microphone set up. There were a few ramshackle tables at which sat some bored or preoccupied Southerners and tourists, sipping on their drinks: herbal teas I thought. There was an "older woman", a Southerner, and judging from the nudges that the Turtles gave each other, she must have confirmed the stereotype of Southern beauty. And the men had a kind of beauty to them as well.

The singer wore sunglasses and kind of lazily delivered his song, and there was something trippy about his backing track. He continued, as people went about their business on the streets. We sat down at our own table and waited until it seemed like the set was over.

The Turtles led the way to talk to the artist, whose name was Percival.

Nice music! That's vaporwave, right?

A bit wearily, perhaps from his long-lasting, low-key performance, Percival replied No, milad, that was chillwave.

Well, it was a fantastic performance nonetheless, said Yonec.

I thank thee for thy compliment. Lad, if thou wouldst listen to vaporwave, perhaps thou shouldst listen to Liquid 92.1
Thou art bound to hear vaporwave if thou listenest for an hour or two.

And the Turtles, in chagrin, realized that they had forgotten their radios.

Worry not, lads, ye may return some other time with your radios. Amuse yourselves in other wise, as ye may do quite easily in Southern City.

The Turtles filled me in a bit on the radio situation. It seems like, unlike in the rest of the city, where there were high-powered stations filling the FM and AM spectrum, with more

or less as few stations as possible, here in Southern City, it was preferred to have numerous low-powered stations, sometimes conflicting with each other at their margins.

Such it was that there was a station, somewhere around here, called Balance 92.1, which shared the same frequency as Liquid 92.1, but which played, day and night, something entirely different than what Liquid played, day and night.

And there was another difference between Southern City radio and core radio. Southern City radio stations were so low-powered, and the popular commitment to radio so high, that some stations could afford to broadcast late at night using batteries.

I wondered aloud if people tended to not get enough sleep, because they listened to the radio so much at night.

A woman passing by stopped and broke in. Thou must be a resident of the core city? I replied, Yes, and I've recently come from the north. Ah, she said, with a beautiful voice, Then thou hast much to learn. Here in Southern City, we have learned different ways to sleep and be awake. Some of us stay awake all the time, and only sleep on cloudy days or weekends.

Why would a person want to do that? I asked.

These are the mystics and the wanderers of Southern City.

Wanderers? People who walk the streets?

Ay, she said, So 'tis.

Is it safe to walk the streets at night?

Child, she said, What would make the streets truly unsafe at night would be if it were that there were no wanderers. Who would watch the streets? The police?

I didn't know what to say. In the core, the police watched the streets — because there were no wanderers? So that there would be no wanderers? Because of bad wanderers?

Child, I see that I am taxing thy ability to respond in conversation. Go in peace, and I will go in mine.

And so we parted.

The Turtles and I found a place to eat lunch. Of everything in Southern City, the food was least unusual. Then, we continued to walk the streets.

We went into one of the plazas where there was an orator delivering a speech. It was delivered not as a call-to-action, but more as a celebration of the art of public speaking. The speaker held us in his thrall for twenty minutes, and when they passed the hat, we put in a few dollars. Then we idled our way around the plaza, looking and remarking at various handicrafts. The Turtles were enchanted by the sad beauty of the handicraft makers, many of them working right in front of us in their sad and beautiful way. The Turtles each bought something from somebody, from whatever woman spoke most to each Turtle's heart. I would have bought something, but I remembered the handkerchief I had at

home, and thought that that was enough for me, at least for now.

We wandered on, and stopped by a few more concerts: a sludge metal band in the middle of the afternoon, a little set by some folk-rockers, and an enchanting qawwali performance. Lanval left that session raving about how he was going to learn qawwali singing and turn the Turtles into a qawwali-funk band. The other Turtles were a bit skeptical, but I could tell that Lanval was the sort of character whose enthusiasms had a way of overtaking him and everyone attached to him. They will soon become a qawwali-funk band, just so long as Lanval doesn't forget.

We had time to do one more thing, so the Turtles led me over to the Museum of Discographic Arts over near the train station for going home. It was an imposing building. We came inside and were guided in a tour around the building, to see the various listening rooms, and the halls lined with compact discs. I had never seen a compact disc in person. They have a kind of rainbow pattern on one side — they are things of rare beauty.

The docent led us to a listening room and talked about the history of music, and the history of speakers. He talked about what great care was taken in sound-treating the room and eliminating hum and distortion. He then asked us if there was something we wanted to listen to. We talked, and soon decided on "My Heart is Yours", a soul number by the famous Gary Burke. The docent said, Certainly, and walked us over to the rack where Burke's music was kept. He picked the proper compact disc off the rack, then walked us back to

the listening room. He put on the compact disc and we became deathly silent as it cued up. And then it played, the most gorgeous string section played, pizzicato marking the entrance of Gary, whose voice I had heard of and had even read about but which I had never *experienced*. The emotion, the nuance, the smoke and sparkle of the whole experience — even tonight, as I write this, I can still hear it in my mind's ear. And the way it haunts me now, I'm glad that I don't listen to music that magical all the time. It's like dessert: it tastes amazing, it's so rich, that it fills you up fast, it's too much, it's fine, it's good, but I set it aside and go on my way in life.

Was that the first time you ever heard recorded music?
asked Lanval on the way back. Well, I said, If you don't count the ice cream truck...

Ice cream trucks?

It's a northern thing, I guess.

But besides that, you had never heard recorded music before?

Yes. That's correct.

'Zounds! A first-timer! And they all flicked my ears.

What a strange custom, I thought to myself.

We were ready to be apart from each other once we got back to the apartment. I told my (other) friends about my

experience that day.

Ray Ann was saying that she had to go in to do some business related to her case tomorrow. Tony was talking about how he was changing his menu and needed to get up early to get work done (even earlier). Joanna was tired from their trip to Southern City yesterday, and Elizabeth had a job interview in the morning. So we all went to bed early, but I'm still processing the sounds that I heard today, wondering how long they will stay in my memory.

32.

Went to work, a ho-hum day. Reminisced about the weekend with my favorite co-worker. Went home.

Ray Ann wasn't there. I figured she was still figuring stuff out with regard to her case. She had to go over some stuff with her lawyer, figure out how they were going to go about the case.

I went to the library until it got dark, then went over to the common room with the others.

Then Ray Ann came in with an interesting look on her face. She looked around the room a little distractedly and then, since it was nobody but us in the room, spoke.

I'm pregnant.

We nodded with big eyes.

I was afraid that this might happen, she went on. But now it's here.

We were quiet.

What was she going to do? She was going to have to quit law school, most likely forever, in order to raise her child.

She would *have to* be a mother, rather than *getting to* be a lawyer. She would definitely need to find a legal father for her child, and a legal extended family. She knew that she wasn't ready for any of this, and she knew, and we all knew, that she was too logical about all of this, and that soon enough she would actually feel what this meant for her.

But what if you give the baby up for adoption? one of us asked, Then wouldn't you be able to go back to law school?

That's a good idea, she said. I should do that. And she seemed rather relieved.

What effect does this have on the case against Justin? one of us asked.

Well, if I keep the child, then he'll be legally responsible to help provide for the child. He could also get paternity rights of some sort. Obviously not if he's convicted of rape. But even if he worms his way out of that, his paternity will be undeniable.

So, in a way, now you know that you can punish him for sure, no matter how the case turns out. I doubt he wants to

pay child support for the next 18 years.

But I'm concerned about the parental rights he might get.

I spoke up.

Think about this. You're going to take him to court, accusing him of rape. He's probably going to spin his own story. Your stories are going to be so far apart. And the jury won't know who to believe. But the judge, who's going to do the paternity ruling, is going to see how you really, really can't possibly trust each other, based on the things you're saying or implying about each other. So he's probably going to rule that you have to stay away from each other, but he has to still pay child support.

That would be nice, she said, But he could also give him parental rights. Like I'd have to send my child to visit him when the child was of a certain age, escorted by a social worker. It's risky.

What about fathering rights, how would that all work? asked Tony.

Okay, so if he's convicted, then he'll lose all of his fathering rights, and one of those will be assigned to my child. If he's not convicted, he'll still have used up one of his fathering rights. So whoever is the legal father of my child will still have all his fathering rights.

We all found this interesting.

What about a plea deal? I asked.

What about a plea deal?

Well, what if you could negotiate with Justin and his attorney such that he could plead guilty— well, I guess this wouldn't be a plea deal exactly, but you could do something where he doesn't have to go to trial and in exchange he gives up paternity rights.

I think he would also be off the hook for child support. I can't see the court, no matter how sympathetic to me, feeling it justifiable to make him pay child support and also not have parental rights if he isn't convicted of any crime.

But I think I could get the judge to absolve Justin of parenthood, still lose one of his fathering rights, and also get a reflexive restraining order against him so that legally we can't see each other ever again.

Would you be interested in doing that?

Maybe. But then I might as well give up my child for adoption. And, I do want Justin to face justice for what he did. I want him to have to go to trial.

Who would get exiled if you got a reflexive restraining order, you, or him?

If I kept the baby, he would. If not, it would be a toss-up.

Okay, so if you gave up the child and go all the way to trial, he could be convicted of rape, sentenced to prison, lose all

his fathering rights, be exiled from your neighborhood non-reflexively. He could be acquitted. If you gave up the child, he would then be off the hook, entirely, except for giving up one of his fathering rights. If you didn't give up the child, he would then be on the hook for child support and also get parental rights, unless he somehow abused that privilege.

Which could easily happen, she said.

Yeah, that's true. In either case, you can always get a reflexive restraining order against him. If you keep the baby, you definitely get to stay in this quarter of the city. If you don't, you might have to leave.

So it seems like you could easily take him to trial, and then if he's acquitted, still get him out of your life.

Well, if I give up the baby, I can't get as powerful a restraining order. Like, I can't keep him out of our whole quarter, only 100 yards away from us. So he can legally get closer, which means he's more likely to be able to get illegally close. So keeping the baby has that benefit. Also, if he's acquitted, he doesn't have the right to make me keep the child, but he does have some rights with regard to where the baby goes if I do give it up. He could block me from giving the baby to someone I know, whom I can trust. I can renounce my rights to know where my baby goes, in that kind of adoption. But I can't make him renounce his, which means that he can still have contact with my child. If he does, he can use that to harass me. But if I keep the baby, I can, through the logic of, our relationship is irrevocably

broken, lack of mutual trust and trustworthiness, make it so that he can never legally see my child.

So it sounds like your best option is to keep the child, if he's acquitted. But if he's convicted, then you could maybe give your child up for adoption. You don't have to choose until the birth, right?

That's true. So I guess that's what I'm going to do.

However, because this pregnancy affects the court proceedings, because I want the paternity ruling to be done at the same time as the trial, I have to tell the city government. And they're going to send me a social worker and try to figure out who it is that's going to be the legal father and legal extended family in the event that I keep the child. And, I also have to find a family I'd be willing to give up my child to, if it comes to that. I was thinking of my cousin, Janelle.

So I was thinking about all of you. I don't know who else to ask to be my child's legal family. I know this is a burden on you guys, especially Tony and Paul. I think one of you has to be it. We can finalize the decision when the child is born, but both of you would have to go through the paperwork and training, I can see advantages to either of you, but again, we don't have to go through all of this now. But, basically, I'm asking all of you to be my child's legal family, in the event that I keep the child. To take the place of Justin and Justin's family.

We all agreed, wholeheartedly, leaping in the moment, not thinking of how this would affect us all, but knowing that we

could live up to her trust, although it might mean that we would sacrifice.

It was a *lot* for us to think about, and here I am, still thinking about it, too late at night, writing by flashlight in the library by myself. What would it mean for me to be a father, even if just legally? I would have to love — our — child as my own child. I would be drawn to Ray Ann for the rest of my life, regardless of any romantic feelings we may or may not ever have for each other. I like Ray Ann, I like being with her and I want to see her well-being. But I don't know if I want to give my heart to her and her child, or at any rate, my heart to her child, and a big part of my freedom and free time.

But, here I am, relatively free. If my uncle could give the apartment to me because I was free, then perhaps Ray Ann could give fatherhood to me because I am free. Tony certainly has more responsibility at this point.

Ah well, I guess I'll try taking a walk in the courtyard. Maybe that will lull me from my thoughts.

33.

The next day, I woke up early and tired, tired from last night.

I had enough time to eat a nice meal of oatmeal and to peel an orange and eat it. My mind was stunned in its usual way by the morning, but I was revived and filled with a kind of dread importance and excitement by thinking of what was spoken of last night. And then I would slump back into thinking about tying my shoes and getting out the door in the cold of the morning, stumbling onto the train, and then

the thought would come to me again as we rolled and rocked to the vicinity of the recycling plant.

At work, I found myself both energized, which sometimes focused me, and yet distracted, of course, by the thought of Ray Ann and fatherhood and the law.

I made a few mistakes more than normal, which wasn't necessarily a cause for professional concern, since we were far from running at our full capacity that day, for whatever vagary of recycling, but of course, in a boring place, people sharpen their eyes, and my favorite co-worker figured out that something was off in my flow.

What's on your mind? she asked, as we worked near each other.

I explained a lot of the story.

Wow, she said. That's a significant thing to have happen. I wish your friend the best. So... a father, huh? Her tone of voice was of someone set back from things to think.

She looked at me but I couldn't tell what the look meant, what it really looked like, because I had to keep working.

We got off work and started talking about New City's next New City's Next Piece of Poop. We agreed that we would go this coming weekend, and show my skeptical friends what reality theater could really be.

I got home and went to the library, where I found Ray Ann. She was sitting, with all of her books closed, and one

notebook open, and she was staring at the wall beyond another table, staring out the window into the courtyard.

Ray Ann, how are you?

Oh, hi Paul. I'm just. I don't know, I wish I knew. I'm thinking about my career, I guess. I was a really good student. I could have been a top lawyer. My teachers said that. OK. So. Here I am. If Justin gets convicted, then I can go back to my law career. But if he doesn't, then I will probably never go back.

I don't know, Paul, this is really getting to me. I have to wait until the trial to find out the fate of the rest of my life. And it's stupid. It's so stupid. He didn't have to do what he did. He got *nothing* out of that. A momentary pleasure. He was just, doing something extra. He was just being empty. You know how bedbugs are? They're stupid. They lie around most of the year, and then when it gets hot, they come out and eat, and then go back into hiding. They don't do anything interesting. They don't really get anything out of life. Rape is stupid. It hurts, and it's stupid. And here I am. My life is changed because of a stupid person, an empty person. He's just a bug, doing what insects do. He just acted on instinct, doing the stupid thing programmed into him to pass on his stupid, meaningless genes. Which I'm giving a pass into this world. But whatever. What can I do about that?

What a stupid, meaningless thing. And here I am. / have to pay the cost. You realize this, Paul. I have to pay the cost. It's not fair being a woman. Men get to be free. Men roam

around like animals. And women pay the cost. But, here you are. You're a man. So you're not all bad people. But it's still not fair.

She said this simply and quietly, without anger. She was just saying the truth, but she was saying it in a way that was not normal for her.

I asked her if there was anything I could do for her and she grabbed my hand and started to cry. She swore and grasped my hand harder. She started saying the same old things, but now more quietly, in a broken voice, she was now saying something beyond the truth... no, it was still the truth. It took all of my attention to hear what she was saying.

My life, she said. My entire life. It's not mine. My life isn't mine. It was taken away from me.

But maybe he'll be convicted, I said. Then you can get your life back.

No, he's not going to be convicted. He's going to be acquitted.

I knew she was right, and I told her so.

Thank you for understanding, she said.

By now she was reaching over my body with her arms, relaxing in her tears, resting her head on my shoulder in an inelegant way.

After a few minutes, she breathed to relax herself, and though (she said), it was nice to lean on me, she should sit up, should not sink into such luxury.

So she sat up, and we sat in silence, and I thought about the future.

And then she wanted to talk about movies. Weren't we going to go to a movie recently? she asked. And I said, Yes, but something came up. And she said, we should go see a movie next weekend. And I told her about New City's Next Piece of Poop. And she said that that sounded very nice.

But we should also go see a movie. And then I said, okay, but which one? And she walked over to the day's newspaper, stacked on one of the tables, and got out the movie listings.

Here's one, she said, The Rainmaker. "When drought persists, only one man can make a difference..."

Here's another, Julia's Mother-in-Law. "She's immanent, transcendent, present by her absence: Julia's Mother-in-Law."

These sound amazing, she said, with great truth in her voice.

What about this one, I said, pointing to The Taleteller: "Trust Everyone... Believe No One..."

What could that possibly even mean? she asked me. I almost thought she was going to cry again, the way she

looked at me, like she was looking into me and seeing another world beyond me.

I don't know, exactly, I said. Maybe that's not the movie for us.

Here's one, she said, sadly. The Bear and the Wolf. Its about two noble animals who live their separate lives, until they are brought together by the same deer, and they start fighting over the deer and...

That's where the description stops. Maybe they kill each other, or maybe they only scar each other?

I don't know, I said, Maybe we should just stick to New City's Next Piece of Poop.

Yes. I think we should stick to that.

And we both laughed at the little joke she accidentally made.

Paul, thanks. she said, putting her arm across my shoulders. Thank you.

And then, after her moment of gratitude and affection, she withdrew her arm, and looked down at her notebook, on which she had been mapping out what she would do with her life, if she were to become a mother.

And I went back to looking through the newspaper, and found enlightening items about City Parliament, West

Quarter rent, a crop failure, the arts scene in our quarter, and so on, but I found myself returning to a kind of electrical thought, which lodged in a front right in the middle of my brain and kept my eyes wide open, about what had just happened between Ray Ann and me. I could tell that I should stay in her life, in some important capacity. Unless, as it happens, we somehow got to the point that we weren't good for each other. Which seemed unthinkable. Of course. As it must. And as it would.

Was I in love with her? I knew that I loved her, but I wasn't sure I was in love with her.

I found myself thinking, but my mind's gaze was looking ahead on something wordless. I didn't know what it was exactly, although I could see it clearly. My mind could not rest on this image, although I was gazing steadily at it, so that I could not form words about it. Like the horizon, I looked into the beyond to see it, and I was barely able to see it was there, although I was steadfastly looking at it.

Finally, by relaxing, it emerged in me: it was her, in her situation. And for a moment it seemed to me that I was alone with her, without time, without sexuality, without fun or tears, simply present, without being able to fully grasp or think or know in each other's presence. I saw her as she really was, as life really is, and I was really myself for that moment. But the moment passed, and my heart started to beat more normally, and the muscles around my eyes relaxed, and my thoughts dulled and I was tired. And I was "stuck" with her next to me, starting to talk to me again, my mind shell-shocked, answering with my other mind, she

talked about how her cousin should visit, Janelle, she wanted to learn more about being a mother, and also to strengthen the ties between her and her cousin, who might become the adoptive mother of her child. This sounded reasonable to me, although I wasn't thinking with my whole brain. It seemed a reasonable enough plan to leave half my brain at rest.

And then it came time for dinner, and I went and got her something, and then went into the common room, where I reported to the others some of what transpired.

Yeah. That's hard, said Elizabeth.

Tony said, Paul, this is a long way out, but maybe you're the one who should become the legal father for Ray Ann's child. I've known her for a long time, but she's never opened up to me like that.

Did anything happen to her before where she would need to open up?

Well, that's the thing, maybe there was, but I was always so busy with work that I could never spend the kind of time you do with her. I know it's a lot of responsibility, but maybe it's for you. I mean, I'll take the classes too, until she makes her decision, because I might as well learn something.

I thanked him for his advice, and then got back to eating my grilled cheese sandwich. We kept quiet for a bit, and then slowly began to talk about various things.

I finished my dinner and went for a walk through the hallways. I thought that perhaps the thing for me was to listen to some music: but the Funk Turtles were not at play. I walked up the stairs and went to the sunroom, and looked at the darkening sky. And then I went back down to see how Ray Ann was doing, and I found her yawning and smiling, and yet I wondered if there was an invisible thread in her of her pain, which was going to come out again. I wondered because in her yawn and her smile, there was that tiny thread, which I knew from my own ways of having a countenance. She was going to go to bed early, she smiled and then looked lost. She got up, with blank eyes, and packed her books up and took them, and I followed her back to her room and said to her Rest well. And she said, Thank you and shut the door, and I went out to the courtyard and looked up at the stars, lying on my back on the tiles. I wondered how large the whole universe was. And then, chilled and relaxed, I came inside to write all of this down. Tomorrow will be a big day, a day of no importance.

34.

Went to work, did my thing, talked to my favorite co-worker, got on the train, came back home, visited Ray Ann.

She was back to her unmoored state, and she was leaning on me in all kinds of ways and I wasn't entirely comfortable with this. Ray Ann was supposed to be a ringleader, an organizer, an initiator. Sure, she could be other things too, but I didn't want that side of her to atrophy. I tried to help her have her own say, think her own thoughts, I withdrew

my help from her sometimes, and eventually she got into a short mood, and yet alternating with a kind of despair. I felt like we were fighting, and I didn't want to fight her. But I guess a fight can bring someone to life? I didn't know what to do.

I really wanted her to go back to being who she was before, but I realized that life makes a person have to become who they're not, it makes deals with a person and establishes new situations and inner realities.

She was going on about her studies again. She was worrying about whether she would be able to finish her school year before the baby came. I told her, Well, what's the worry? Either you'll get through it or you won't. If Justin is convicted, then you'll have enough time to make it up. If he's acquitted, then it doesn't matter.

But she was intent on finishing her school year strong, as she finished every school year. So she would try to focus hard on her studies, but her mind, of course, slipped right back into injustice and trauma and hurt, and she would sigh in frustration, and force her eyes back on the page, and I could see this all without having to ask, and she kept focusing and then finding herself focusing on what she was really focusing on and finally I said Just stop. You'll be okay. Look, let's talk about the worst case scenario. Let's say Justin gets acquitted. You keep the baby. What will your life look like?

Well, I guess it'll be either a girl or a boy?

Yeah, I said, I would think so.

Okay. So I give birth and first thing I do is name the child. If it's a boy... what would I name him?

Do you have any man in your family you would want to honor?

Maybe Shawn. My Uncle Shawn. He's a good man. He has three kids.

Okay, so what if the child is a girl?

Oh, I've already figured it out. Joanna Elizabeth.

That made sense.

So then what?

Well, I'd nurse the child, I'll say it's a girl, so I'd nurse her, and change her and just be totally immersed in her. And I'd move out of my room into a bigger room in the building, for there to be space for a crib. And I'd come up for air every so often. You guys would show up sometimes, and we would play with the baby and have adult conversations so that I wouldn't go crazy. And she would grow up to the point that she could walk and then talk. And I'd be teaching her to speak, and you guys would help. And then I'd start to educate her. I wouldn't force my own life on her, she could become whoever she turned out to be, but I would make sure whatever it was, she learned a lot, and had discipline, and learned to care about the world and other people. Yes,

that would come first. Especially if I had a son. If I had a son, I would always be thinking about his legal father and his biological father. All the time. I would be thinking about how to get a boy to learn to care about other people as people, like his legal father, and to have the discipline to not turn out like his biological father. I will know that he has the genes of his biological father, and those will never go away.

But the law is founded on the principle that people can choose, and they don't have to be the kind of people who commit crimes. And my son will grow up and start going to school and he'll make friends. Or it will be my daughter who's going to school. Who knows, I may have another child by then, if I can find a man who wants to marry me. And then I guess maybe one of you would be off the hook as far as being legal father. But you'd always be there. And the daughter would go to school and people would make fun of her, but I would tell her to stand up to them. And she would have friends and I would always be drilling her when she got home from school. Study, study, study. You have to have an education. Not everyone has to have an education, but I want to have an educated daughter. We would study together. I would keep studying the law. When my child is old enough, I'd start to take classes again. We would study together in the library or even at a cafe on the weekends, she would sit next to me with her arithmetic or literature or whatever, and I would be there with my law books. And I would teach her about the law. I would want her to know the law just as a regular citizen, even if she doesn't go on to be a lawyer.

And at some point, I'd have to explain to my child about her biological father. At first, I would explain in a soft way, in a

vague way. But along when she was ready, I'd tell her the whole truth. And that would sit with her funny, and then her father and I wouldn't be able to take it away, but we could give her a flow to her thinking, to let that fact drift off to the side in the stream. And then she would keep growing, into a young woman. And then she would go off into the world. And maybe I'd even be a lawyer by then.

So, that's the worst-case scenario, she said.

Okay. I said. And that's all I said because I could tell that she still didn't accept what was happening to her.

I was beginning to get hungry, and it was even before dinner, so I went looking for some kind of snack food. As I walked by, Lanval saw me.

Hey, Lanval.

Hey, Paul.

Hey, I'm looking for some kind of snack food. I'm really hungry, but I want to keep studying in the library.

With your lady friend?

Well, she is my friend, and she is a lady. Sure, we could call her that.

Man, you're lucky, said Lanval. You for sure have three ladies who have the hots for you. The library lady, Ray

Ann?, and that co-worker of yours definitely does. And Elizabeth does, I know for a fact.

How do you know that?

I looked at her diary and it says so.

In my head I thought, She keeps a diary... interesting.

With my mouth I said, You hang out with Elizabeth?

Just recently. I know she has a lot of time on her hands, so I wanted to enlist her help in my efforts to reach out to Constance. They're both older women, and they both sketch. That's enough to explain a lot.

I agreed with him, provisionally.

Interesting... Elizabeth.

Well, all I'm saying is, you're lucky. How did you manage to be that kind of guy?

I don't know, I said. I never really tried. The last couple of years I was squatting in the basements of abandoned houses. Maybe you should try doing that. Go up north where I'm from.

Okay, no. He said. But maybe in a way, yes. Maybe I have to learn about hardship.

I would say that the ladies tend to like men who can live through hardship. It's a useful trait.

His eyes widened. I never thought of that. Huh.

But I was pretty sure he still didn't understand what he needed to understand.

I still needed a snack but decided not to ask him, for dignity's sake. I kept walking around and finally found my way into the office, thinking that perhaps if necessary I would go outside to a nearby store and buy maybe some bread and hummus. Not the most economical thing to buy just enough for my late afternoon snack, so shouldn't I buy a whole loaf and a whole container of hummus? But maybe they'd go bad... I guess I could put them in the basement and hopefully I wouldn't forget them there.

As I entered the office, I saw that they had out some complimentary rolls for prospective renters. I asked the manager if I could have one, explaining the situation, at least, as much as I thought was relevant to him.

Sure thing. Hey, I've heard about what happened with Ray Ann. I know you two are friends. We've got our eyes out for Justin all the time. I've seen him walking by the building sometimes. I always give him the evil eye. The guy's a pansy, but be careful. He might hire somebody. He doesn't have an excellent heart.

Was this news? In a way it was, but in a way it wasn't. We all kind of got used to the thought of Justin being our

neighbor, and yet like a fact we didn't like, though we looked away, we were reminded. I wondered, as I ate my roll (which was fine), should I tell Ray Ann about this? I decided I should, wondering what the consequences would be.

When I told her, she laughed, a kind of quiet laugh, not a free one, and said, Oh yeah, I knew that. I've been paying a lot more attention than you have.

Well, I said, it's good to see that the front office cares.

Of course they care! she exclaimed.

Well, I knew they watched the door against him, but just, from the way the guy talked, he cared.

Right, he went beyond what he had to for his job. Well, we have good management here. You're learning all kinds of encouraging things.

And we sat, reading, writing, whatever, until dinner time.

After dinner, we both joined the others. Ray Ann seemed to figure that being with people was better for her, at least tonight, than being with her books.

We had a good time, listened to the radio. They had a band on that played some really nice folk-rock. And then it got too dark to transmit and we heard them Fade out with the brown out, as the announcer put it. The static gradually took over the channel, as they sang sweetly.

We played the game where you listen to static. I remember doing that when I was a child back in the old city. We would hear all kinds of things in the static, mostly moods and vibes, sometimes voices.

One of us clearly heard the word “Sometimes”, but the rest of us didn’t hear it.

Eventually, it grew to be time to go to bed.

35.

Went to work, ho hum, went home.

Ray Ann was different today. She was quiet, and I looked at her to see if I could see the invisible thread, but I didn’t see it. We studied for a bit and she said to me, You know, I’ll make a good mother. If it comes to that. And yeah, if I raise my kid, I’ll never rise to the level I could have risen to. I know that. I’ll never be the best lawyer I could have been. And I’ll never be young again. That was taken away from me. But. Life is brutal.

And she laughed at that, and it was a beautiful sight, and though she was only being open-hearted, it was I who felt tears come to my eyes. But what use are tears at a time like that? I guess when I looked in her eyes, she might have guessed at them, because she grew quiet and said, Okay Paul, now what?

And I said, Try not to forget what you have learned.

I know I'll forget, she said, But that's okay, life will keep teaching me... that... life is brutal. I'll get it someday.

We went to be with the others in due time, and spent the evening at a kind of ease.

36.

Went to work, felt a strange kind of bad feeling. I guess it's like the fires started by an earthquake.

The manager at work had more people come in to work due to the summer rush. But then a thunderstorm came in the afternoon, and we got browned out. I was in the shift that went home this time.

I could hear the sound of thunder on my way home, which always lifts my spirits. Flashes of lightning, some humidity up here: all things that I enjoy. I wondered, though, what would happen to my weekend plans to take the others to New City's Next Piece of Poop. During the summer rush, I have to work until 5 or 6PM — which is a bit too late to make it to the theater. I considered taking the day off work, but knew that that would be looked-askance-at during the summer rush. Considering that I had barely started the job a few weeks ago, I probably didn't have a chance at pulling that off. So I was somewhat disappointed as I lounged around the courtyard, feeling the large, scattered drops of thunderstorm rain fall on me.

As I admired the darkness of the sky, Elizabeth entered the yard and looked with me.

Do you want to go up to the sunroom and look at the lightning? she asked.

I thought to myself, Why not? and followed her up to the room. We sat waiting for flashes in the sky, talking about this and that.

Then we saw a flash, and even a bolt of lightning. Elizabeth cheered.

We got to talking about Constance, and then Lanval. I mentioned to her, in a casual moment, that Lanval had said that she'd written that she had the hots for me in her diary.

I wanted to know the truth of the matter.

Elizabeth blushed and said Oh no, that was a different Paul I was writing about. He's one of the artists at the Art Center that I go to.

Oh, interesting. Well, do you think I'll ever meet him?

It depends on how I play my hand... she said, with meaning.

We admired the lightning some more and then came back down to the courtyard, where there was a young girl and a young boy, probably about 6 years old, playing in the puddles that were forming as it rained. I had never noticed these particular children before and wondered if they were

visiting. They were safe from lightning: I counted enough time from the flashes to the thunder.

But a woman, presumably their mother, swept them into the building with admonishments about the weather, and they changed the course of their afternoon inward.

We soon went inside, because of how damp we were getting, and entered the library, where Ray Ann had her books but was instead of reading them, reading the newspaper. She read a few headlines to us by way of greeting:

West Quarter man found stabbed in his bed; Police investigating

City Parliament considering raising the sales tax by half a percent; Citizens opposed

Life expectancy up by approximately 0.2 years to 73.4 years according to annual report; Men living 72.5 years, Women 74.3

Arts fair in core to block off several streets and feature famous artists

Flood in Old City; Uriaunt Avenue underwater

This last item interested me. I knew Uriaunt Avenue and I was trying to remember if I knew anyone who lived there.

What's the old city like? asked Ray Ann.

I asked them what they thought of when they thought about the place, based on what they heard. It sounded about as accurate as necessary, so I told them so.

Ray Ann mentioned that her cousin Janelle and her husband Mark and their kids were going to be visiting not tomorrow but the day after. I hoped that I wouldn't miss that due to work, either. Mark was from the old city, it turned out. I wondered if he and I would have anything in common because of that.

We continued our evening in ways that were interesting to us at the time but which are not too interesting to recount and rewrite by hand.

37.

The next morning, the sky was cloudy again with a high likelihood of afternoon thunderstorms. So I didn't have to go in to work.

All of us, Tony, Ray Ann, Joanna, Elizabeth and I, took our seats on the train at the right time and got to our destination, where we met my coworker and one of her friends. We bought our tickets and entered the theater, which was "brown-lit".

If possible, this episode of New City's Next Piece of Poop was as amazing as, and more intense, than the first one I'd seen.

At a climactic moment, as the contestant had just climbed to the top of the slide and begun her descent, the sky, which

had rumbled dramatically and quite appropriately through the earlier part of the show, let loose with its loudest thunder, a violent sound from a rather nearby lightning bolt.

We gathered under some awning in the neighborhood, all of us, and talked about the show we had seen. Even Tony and Joanna had to admit that it was amazing.

I guess it's like, she said, I just had to take a certain amount of time away from it, and when I came back, it was fresh again.

Tony had to agree, and led us to a friend's deli where we ate some good sandwiches. Then we headed home, seeing my co-worker and her friend get off at their stop, and then we got off and went inside our apartment, all of us a bit wet and hoping to dry off.

It was getting dark and the storm was breaking up. We went up to the sunroom to look at the colors in the sky. It was a good evening, and we all breathed a little bit more deeply.

38.

The next day was clear and warm and I had to go to work.

I worked from 8AM until 6PM and then went home. My favorite co-worker and I talked about my friends. She liked them all.

Then I went home. Mark and Janelle were there with their kids, all of them and Ray Ann enjoying the evening in the courtyard. I drew up a chair and sat with them.

I didn't say very much, I just watched, seeing how much of Ray Ann's vibe is her family's vibe. There were two kids, Alex, and John. Alex was a walker, while John sat in his stroller, gazing quietly at perhaps the blue of the sky, perhaps nothing in particular. They had the radio going. It was a nostalgia show, and the band played one of those "decade" songs. I'd never heard it before. It was an instrumental funk song, for the most part, with a break maybe two or three times where they just had drums doing a disco pattern and there was a group chanting

Use it up, wear it out / Make it do or do without

— over and over and over.

Look, said Ray Ann, John's dancing! Janelle took notice of her youngest son.

Yeah! You're dancing! she cooed.

John's motions may indeed have been contingent on the beat of the song.

The adults reminisced about the song. It was ten years old. To think of all the things that had happened in the last ten years: Ray Ann's studies, her time spent working to save up for law school; vs. Janelle meeting Mark, getting married,

moving, having two kids. It seems they were about the same age.

Tony, Elizabeth, and Joanna came out on the patio each as their schedules permitted. I realized that Mark and Janelle and their kids were probably going to stay the night. I said something about it and they said, Yes, we're renting a few rooms in a neighboring apartment building — not *that* one, of course, they said, in reference to Justin's apartment building.

Soon enough, they had to go and get their children in bed, and we said goodbye.

And I stayed up a bit longer and then went to bed.

39.

The workweek officially started again and I did my thing, worked my job. I came back home and saw Mark and Janelle leaving, Ray Ann saying goodbye on the curb by the apartment building. Mark had Alex's hand and Janelle was pushing John in his stroller.

I went inside with Ray Ann and to my surprise, she didn't go to the library. She went to a common room, and I followed her, and she laid out on a couch and rested. I wondered what she was thinking, and I asked her.

Well, she said. It was very nice to see my cousin today. I'm just trying to rest right now, to let my mind wander.

Where is your mind wandering? I asked.

She said, I'm thinking of cats. Did you ever have a pet cat?

I said no. I used to have a pet cat. Her name was Pickles.

Pickles the cat. She would just walk around and around the house, and then, I don't know what she did all day, but it was like, at every moment, she was empty. She had nothing inside of her, she just did things. Being a cat must be great, except for the emptiness part.

What about dogs? I asked, Are dogs empty?

No, she said, dogs aren't empty. They're doing the best they can, all the time. But cats just do things because they do them. Imagine what it would be like, she continued, If everything was taken away from us, and we lived like cats — but we weren't empty. What if there was no law school, and no law, no family ties, no friendship, no love, just—existence. And existence would be full, and contain everything that was worthy of existing. I guess love would be included in that, all the ties and bonds, but without any slavery. Just, existence. We would just do things to do things. Hey, I don't even really know that cats are empty.

I'm pretty sure they're empty, I said, philosophically.

Yeah, you're right, she said, in a very relaxed way.

Well, maybe we'll get a chance to live that way, sometimes.

Yeah, I guess we do live there sometimes. But what if that was the way things were all the time?

That would be very nice, I said.

She agreed, and then fell asleep!

She looked so peaceful sleeping there, but I wasn't sure what to do at this point. Other people might want to use the room. I thought that it would probably be best to wake up Ray Ann and take her back to her room. So I did so, and she thanked me, as she walked in a sleepy haze. I figured that all the excitement of seeing her relatives wore her out.

I went over to the library to do some reading by myself and Elizabeth was there. She had a canvas with her, which appeared to be half-finished.

Did you go to the Art Center today? I asked.

Yeah, she said.

What are you painting?

It's going to be a tree. A really tall tree, with benches around the trunk. And there will be little people — well, full-sized human beings, but you know what I mean — little people walking around the base of the tree. It's like, the tree is going to be doing its thing, and they're going to be doing their thing.

Nice. I said.

And then I returned to my reading, and she to hers.

When we went to dinner, Ray Ann was already there with Tony and Joanna. She was laughing and talking, and still had a crease on her face from her pillow. There was something resonant in her voice, I suppose it was as relaxed as I'd ever heard it. I couldn't think of the last time Ray Ann had just awoken. I guess I was always out of the complex before she got up.

We ate dinner and it reminded me of when I first came to the complex. The dynamic was more like that. But Ray Ann was still not really the ringleader anymore. The circus was ringleaderless at this point, which I suppose could be a good thing. Some new leader could rise up, or we could all have a little more space to be ourselves. Or it could be a bad thing. These last few weekends have been quite interesting, and of course as long as New City's Next Piece of Poop is running, we'll have entertainment aplenty, but the show only has a few more episodes left, and then what? It's strange how life revolves around the passage of time, just getting through it, staying interested. We've got 73.4 years or whatever that we're expected to fill with activities and enjoyments and accomplishments, and what are we going to do if, having the opportunity to live, we don't even know what to do with that life, and so we don't really live it? What a tragedy, I guess.

A good ringleader can provide a sense of salvation to those whom she leads. She can make life happen. She can find

things to do, and think for everyone else, and help us get through our lives.

But, I don't know if Ray Ann is the kind of person for the role anymore. Maybe we all need to just get married and have kids and move on in life. Tony can marry Joanna and Elizabeth can marry that Paul guy at the Art Center. We can all fend for ourselves.

I guess that would leave me with Ray Ann. It's up to me to be with Ray Ann. But I don't know... I don't know if that's what I want. What I want is a ringleader, more than I want her. If she could be ringleader again, and I could be the new guy she was including, like in the past, then that would be right. I'd definitely follow her. After all she's been through? Of course.

I could tell that I was leading her, a few days ago, she leaned on me, I remember that. I don't want to be a leader, I want to be a follower. Or, even better, to live in a world that requires neither leading nor following, a world where I just do what I do, I just live. Maybe I already live in that world, though, and somehow I am not satisfied even with that. Or maybe I'm crazy. I think I'm thinking too much.

It's late at night, as I'm writing all this down, thinking all these thoughts out onto the page. I look back on what I've written about marriage. I guess getting married and having kids is like, THE accomplishment? Once you do that, everything becomes irrelevant, because then you have kids.

And you're not focused on yourself anymore. You're focused on them. And the whole point is for them to focus on themselves until they get tired of that, and then they break their minds by themselves having kids. And so the human race perpetuates itself. We're driven not by a love of life, we're driven by a disposal of ourselves, and a desire to escape our relentless thoughts. And then we pass this on to children? I can either say Of course, how wonderful! or I can wonder if there's something more. But what could that possibly be? We have everything we want in this life.

I think about what Ray Ann was talking about, about being like a cat. I feel like that's the best life too, that that encapsulates everything that is good in life. But as I think about even that, I realize that it's the sheer process of living that I want to escape. But I'm not allowed to die — I've got recyclables to sort, and my shoulder to be cried on. And whatever thing that gets beyond the cat's life, is necessarily unimaginable. If I can imagine it, it's part of conceivable life.

For me, living is a habit, and what you often do with habits is break them so that you can come back to the activity without it being a habit anymore. But I don't see that as a possibility. I don't believe in life after death, unless that's what sleeping and waking up is. Sometimes that works, and I guess I'll try that now, although it will be a while in coming.

Went to work. While I was there it occurred to me, while sorting plastics that, Ray Ann will probably choose you to be her child's legal father. Let this be known as My Brain's prediction of the future.

I came back home, and as is my habit, settled in the library next to Ray Ann. I tried to read, but eventually my eyes fixed on the scene out the window, which had nothing too interesting going on in it, and eventually I started to speak to Ray Ann.

I went on in a kind of flow, casual but quickly getting sucked into the real current, found myself talking about many of the same things I wrote about in my diary last night, about the need to dispose of time, and the purpose of life and all that, and I spoke in many of the same words, with the same gaze and frustration, I went on and was beginning to repeat myself, not daring to look at her face (nor did that occur to me), always looking out the window at the courtyard, where a bird perched on a fountain for a moment, without giving me relief in the slightest.

I just wish I knew more, I said, But I don't know if that would help.

She stopped me with a gesture.

Paul. she said.

I looked at her.

It's okay. she said.

Everything will turn out alright in the end.

I wanted with all my mind to not be affected by what she said, but I just was, I just did feel grounded, quieted, relieved.

I smiled a little and she smiled a little, and we each in turn went back to our books. I found a new appreciation for my natural history book, which was explaining about the relative distribution of elements in the Earth's crust. She was still studying the law.

We went to dinner and I was in such a peaceful mood that I didn't say anything, I just looked on my friends with a warmth inside me, watching them be who they were, delighting in that. I was quiet, and Ray Ann was quiet, although less so. No one noticed, or else they might have thought that we'd come to some kind of romantic agreement with each other.

41.

Went to work, did my thing. I found myself getting lost in the work, so much so that I didn't notice my favorite coworker talking to me.

She was saying something about before we met up on the weekend with everyone to see New City's Next Piece of Poop, she had something to show me. I wondered what it might be, but she said it was a secret. I asked her if it was a

gift for me. And she said No, it's just something I want to show you.

Do the other people need to be around? I asked.

No, she said.

Then maybe you can show it to me after work tomorrow. I'm really curious now.

She said that that made sense.

I got back into my work and ended the day feeling kind of dazed but pleased.

I took the train home and got off and walked the usual way, but then decided to take a detour, which led me to a part of the neighborhood I hadn't been before. And there I saw Justin, walking by himself, stopping and peering up at the multistoried buildings, looking abstracted and abstract. I knew him by sight, and I supposed he might know me, but I don't think he felt much significance inhering in me, because he didn't seem to take notice when we happened to make eye contact. I kept walking, as I had nothing to say to him and no business to perform involving him. I noted his presence, recorded it in my head, for recollection later. Then I continued my walk, and arrived home at around dinner time.

I told everyone about where I'd seen Justin, which was an interesting note if not one that anyone wanted to internalize, and so we didn't discuss it too much. I

wondered in my head about Justin. Was he evil? If so, what does evil look like to itself? Maybe it would look something like, the usual story of Justin is just a guy getting through life, then “something happens” (which he does) and all of a sudden he’s nothing but evil, for a few days, and then he recovers his sense of being good old Justin for the duration of his life. He never really digs into his own destructive tendencies, because he’s able to return to the world where everything makes sense and he’s a good person whom people respect, he’s back to that narrative. And so that thing in him lives until it does something really criminal.

And of course this is a very nice thing to suppose that Justin has going on in him, but I only thought of it because I see the same process in myself. I’m not saying that I’m going to do anything like what Justin did, but I think I’m going to do *something* evil, harmful, disastrous. But right now I’m in “good Paul” mode, so how can I defend against it? I’m thinking that for the sake of other people, I should figure out a way to work against my natural tendency, my process, my ruthlessly positive narrative.

Lost in the flow of my own thinking, I become disengaged from the flow of the conversation, but I eventually bring my thoughts out in conversation. The others propose various methods. Maybe I could read a text every morning to remind myself. Maybe I could keep a record of the ways that I tend to harm people, and that list could be the text I read every morning. Elizabeth points out that maybe it’s a good thing to focus on the positive in myself. Sometimes when you think you’re a bad person, it makes you a bad person. Joanna thought it might make sense to think of something utterly unrelated to either my good or my bad image, since

both were false. Maybe a moderate image? But Elizabeth rejoined that even an accurate image of myself could be false, in a way, as it would focus me on myself. I agreed with her that self-focus was the source of some of my evils, and certainly for many of my lackings as far as doing positive good. Joanna, then Tony, then Elizabeth, tried but failed to think of what that other thing would be, other than to just focus on doing good to other people, which would very easily feed back into “good Paul”. Ray Ann suggested that I could focus on what was lovable in other people, and I thought that was an interesting idea.

Soon enough, by whatever process, it became time to go to bed.

42.

I went to work in great anticipation of what my favorite coworker would show me after work. On a few occasions, my curiosity got the better of my ability to focus on my sorting, and I made some unforced errors.

After work, we stepped outside the plant, where some of the employees had their knives out, were whittling and talking, and she got out of her messenger bag a brown paper bag.

And out of the brown paper bag she drew a strange-looking object. It had stiff fibers or perhaps pieces of a plant like bamboo, reeds, perhaps, woven into a tube shape. She said to me

Stick your index finger into this end (she indicated) and then the index finger of the other hand into this end.

And of course, I did so, as smooth as glass I flowed into the situation.

Now, she said. Take your fingers out.

I tried, but as I pulled, I found that the tube somehow gripped my fingers tighter the more I pulled!

My favorite coworker was laughing at me.

After about half a minute of trying over and over what wasn't really working, I paused, and thought, and then pushed my fingers *together* a bit, and pushed against the tube with my thumbs while gently drawing my fingers out.

Very good, She said, Very good.

What is this thing? I asked.

This is a finger trap. I found it in my grandfather's stuff after he died. I don't know where it comes from originally. He used to use it to mess with people. We had a lot of fun with it as children.

Well, thank you for showing me. There's something really beautiful about it.

There was something especially beautiful about watching you try to get it off.

Of course.

Well, I just wanted to share that little moment with you. I should catch my train.

Hold on, I said, Maybe you should bring this when we go see New City's Next Piece of Poop. You can show all of my friends.

Right on! That's a great idea. Okay, see you later!

Bye, I said.

I went home and had an uneventful evening.

43.

The end of the workweek, thinking about who knows what. I went to work, did my thing, went home, sat with Ray Ann, ate dinner, went to bed. An entirely ordinary day.

Except that on my way home, I got off the train a stop early and walked through more of the neighborhood. I specifically wanted to investigate a flagpole that I could see from the train, which had the city flag on top, but also two other flags that I couldn't place, which flew below it. I took a look at the base of the flagpole and saw from the informational plaque that one of the flags that flew below was a commemorative flag for the founding of the city. I looked up at it and sure enough saw the date of the founding of New City on it. The

other was apparently the flag of the neighborhood. How interesting. I wondered if there were any other flags, for other neighborhoods. I supposed there probably were.

I wondered if it were possible for apartment complexes to have flags. That would certainly be interesting. That would be a nice little business, to make them, if the custom caught on. And that made me think of Elizabeth. Maybe I could pitch the idea to her, maybe she'd like it, or at least like to think about it.

I brought it up at dinner time and she seemed interested. Why not? she said. I guess I could learn to sew. Or maybe it would be better if I found someone to make them, and I would sketch the designs for them, talk to the apartment complexes.

She thought some more and imagined how complexes could come together in the process of making the designs. And then we said to her, Well, what if she started with us? We could maybe get a flagpole for the roof of the complex, and fly the city flag, the neighborhood flag, and the complex flag.

Okay, she said, But I have to find someone who can do the sewing.

Okay, we said, thinking of the possibilities.

Woke up, it was the weekend, no more sorting, instead it was the day of the finger trap. I did the laundry in the morning and various other chores and errands.

We arrived at the show and waited in line and in line, my coworker sprung the trap on an unsuspecting friend of mine, in the presence of the others: Tony. It was a fun moment, of course, but not really as appealing to the others as it had been to me. It seemed to make sense, somehow, that such a thing would be obscure, something only a grandfather would have, in a manner of speaking. Before, I thought it had potential, but now, seeing their reactions, I realized that it really didn't have any potential. Somehow I couldn't believe in it in and of itself.

We went into the show, which was amazing as always. And then we went home.

45.

Hung around the complex all day. It was one of those days where I get enough sleep but somehow I'm tired all day, kind of a laid-back day.

I guess nothing much really happened.

46.

Went to work, it was fine, came home, sat with Ray Ann.

There was something funny in Uncle Orrville's
Headscratchery. It went like this:

—When I [Uncle Orrville] was a young man, I needed to learn how to become a hog farmer, so I went to work for a man who had a proper name, but who was in reality the Hog Master. I'll never forget his advice on the first day I was with him. He saw that I was a young man with a lot of potential, so he gave me some of his best wisdom on the first day,

That it may do you the most good,

he said. He took me down into the hog pens, and the smell was tremendous. He took me to one of the pregnant sows, and he squatted down next to her and asked her how she was doing.

Then he said to me, what I'll never forget:

If it looks like a hog, acts like a hog, smells like a hog, it's just that, a hog. But there is a way that you can make a hog not be a hog.

What way is that? I asked.

If you think hard enough.—

Hah, said Ray Ann, I visited a hog farm when I was a kid. I had that smell stuck in my head for days. Of course, it didn't help that I only had one pair of shoes, and I couldn't get them all the way clean.

Did you live out in the country?

No, I lived in the city but I had an aunt and uncle who lived in the country. One time while I was visiting them, we went over to the hog farm. My aunt thought it would be a good thing for me to see, and, you know, smell, but she also regretted the smell that came back with us.

What did your aunt and uncle do out in the country?

They were accountants, agricultural accountants. They both worked for the county.

Nice. I said. How is your studying coming along?

School is going alright. My project right now, on my own, is to study contract law. How is it that two people, who don't trust each other, can sit down, and assuming that the other could be willing to do the ultimate in skullduggery against them, come up with a document that gives each of them the confidence to do their part of an agreement? It's just a piece of paper, but they trust it so far that they make themselves trustworthy to each other, at considerable cost to themselves, (and, at the same time, of course, at considerable benefit).

I replied, It seems like if they want that benefit badly enough, it's worth the risk of being betrayed.

Yeah. Well, part of the picture is that there are people who will enforce these contracts, like the government. So people

are afraid of what happens if they get caught breaking the agreement.

I replied, Isn't there an implicit agreement with the government, that they won't use their powers against us?

That is, if the government wrote a contract with us, who would enforce the government's responsibilities towards us?

It seems to me like enforcement happens, but more fundamentally, certain bad things just do or they don't happen, and if they don't happen enough, great, but if they do happen, then you have to deal with the consequences.

Yeah, she said, I guess that's how it is. Well, the law is all about the coercive power of words, but it's possible to form something like a contract without coercion, for instance when people choose to spend their lives together. Those two people build their trust up to a certain point, and then they both just do trust each other, and they find themselves spending a lot of time together and taking on risks together.

And how do they build trust?

That's the thing, she said. No one knows and no one ever can fully know.

I think if you thought about it enough, you could figure it out. I'm sure there's a list of traits that you could come up with, and once you had that list of traits, you could say, Check, Check, Check, okay, they have all the traits, I can trust them.

Is that how trust works for you?

Well, in the moment, yeah, I just do or do not trust. But I'm sure it's just my intuition quickly calculating some list of traits, and checking them off. I think we could come up with an ironclad list of trustworthy traits, and then if we just knew how to identify them in people, we could always trust people who would never let us down.

Maybe so, she said. But how could we trust that? And how could we trust ourselves to apply the judgment? Ultimately, there are some things we just trust, just because we do. Just like living in the moment. The moment comes just because it does, and it is what it is. It surprises and reveals.

But ultimately, I said, When we investigate, we find that underneath everything, there's a definite reality, which is more or less stable. We're all just made up of atoms and psychic forces. We may not understand them perfectly, but over and over we find ourselves understanding them as we investigate them.

So you trust that process?

Yeah, I do. I said. Okay, I see your point.

(But I was only seeing her point provisionally, in my head I was scheming how it was that I could not see her point and have a rejoinder. But these thoughts were interrupted when:)

I noticed Ray Ann looking at me in a way that I didn't expect, not to say that I thought she was looking at me as though she was in love with me, which I was more or less prepared for, but she was looking at me with great sorrow and love. I asked her what she was feeling, what she was thinking, but she just looked away as her eyes grew moist. I didn't understand.

I wanted to understand. I wanted to control.

And I realized that in the moment, and felt myself feeling completely fine, smoother than glass, there was no friction inside of me. And yet I thought and was barely able to think that there was something wrong here. I was a stranger to Ray Ann's reality, and everything that I could do would coincidentally ruin or destroy the relationship we had together. Somehow this precious thing, this thing that gave me so much sustenance and hope, could be torn to pieces by any word that I said. I knew that this was one of those moments, and so I sat still, and breathed to myself, full of clarity, logic, and blindness, waiting out this storm — which was actually my clear skies, the clear skies which can damn a sailing vessel.

Soon enough, it was time for dinner and we quietly made our way to the dining room, and ate, and had our fill of conversation and then went off toward bed.

Went to work, feeling the thought of what happened deeper than I could see in myself, then having the thought emerge, a thought and mood of shame.

I talked to my favorite co-worker about the next New City's Next Piece of Poop performance. I think this is the second-to-last in the series.

I came home and avoided Ray Ann. I wanted to see her, but I felt a discipline in me telling me not to. I decided to turn my eyes away. I went out walking. No one really noticed.

Now it's bedtime and I wonder if I'll get through this phase or not. I wonder what Ray Ann thinks of me. Does she know what was going on inside of me? What was it that really happened between the two of us? What was it in that conversation that made the difference? I wanted to talk to her, but I felt a discipline inside me telling me not to. And then I started to question this discipline. Where did it come from? Was it prudence? I thought that's what it was. But I didn't like it, so I was looking to see if there were other names for it. But then, since I wanted to discredit it, how could I believe it was anything other than prudence? Or maybe, worse yet, it wasn't prudence, exactly, maybe it was *reality*. And how could I question that? And how could we get our relationship back, if it was so? But then, maybe I didn't really want this relationship anymore. I was fine with not knowing Ray Ann's heart. It felt perfectly fine. Do I want to be in a relationship when I'm like that, when I might very easily destroy her without understanding what I was doing? And why should I be in a relationship with someone if I didn't have any desire to connect with them? No hunger for

that, no motion? If I felt fine, even good, without connecting and attaching? I've been thinking about these things, but now I'll try to go to bed.

48.

Went to work, in an odd mood still. Came home. Sat in a different common room, reading my books by myself. Lanval was there doing homework.

I stayed and even avoided going in to dinner. Instead I went out to eat. And I came back and read some more. I knew that my friends would notice, that Ray Ann would really notice, but I had to do it.

Why do I have to do what it is that I do? It's a mystery to me. I'm sure I have reasons, but what are they? Will I ever find out what they are? I'm sure this all has to do with fear and shame, of course. But identifying that doesn't get me anywhere. My mind freezes up, it won't follow leads. It just "knows" that I have to sit here by myself.

And I try going to bed, but I can't sleep. So I've walked up to the sunroom, and I'm looking up at the stars, lying down on one of the couches. And still, it's like my life is a list, or even a legal document, written in many black and white glyphs, and I feel fine. I feel fine, but the glyphs keep coming, and they very carefully enumerate a structure and a logical flow, a machine. I think about contract law.

Somehow the construction of the language gives people the common expectation of things. That expectation is their

reality. I'm living in a reality which is written out by these dry thoughts, by this logic. Who wrote this contract? Is Ray Ann bound by it even? No, it seems that it could be that only I am bound by it. Or maybe she is too? Did I write this contract? I don't want to abide by it, I wouldn't sign it, except: I have to sign it, I would sign it again in a heartbeat, I discipline myself to sign it. I see all this and it makes no difference. Things could not be otherwise than they are. I am happy under this law, my heart is clear, I am at peace, although I keep thinking and I can't sleep.

But, I will try to sleep again.

49.

I went to work, and did my thing, and came home.

And I sat in that other common room, studying, and Ray Ann came in and touched me on the arm so that I looked up at her, although I knew she was in the room as soon as she entered.

Come sit with me, she said.

And I look at her for half a second and said, Yeah.

And I got up, efficiently and of course, and followed her out of that common room and back to the library.

And we sat next to each other, but neither of us read much. We talked to each other of different little things, and then of

what we were reading, and we talked about our relationship. But we didn't talk in too much depth about what happened. Instead we talked about the future, which was just a way to say to each other that that rupture between us was in the past. I talked about how I was settling in to this apartment complex, and that I liked it, and since I owned my room, I thought I would probably stay there a long time. And Ray Ann talked about her baby, and how the manager had already staked out one of the larger apartments for her. And we talked about legal fatherhood although Ray Ann hadn't come to a decision. But she talked about how this was a good place to raise a child, if Justin could be gotten out of the neighborhood. And she talked about her education and her desire to become a lawyer. And in all this she thought she would stay in this apartment building. And so as we were walking to dinner, she said,

So, Paul, since you want to live here, and I want to live here, I think we will be seeing a lot of each other for a long time.

The others had noticed that there was some kind of falling out between us, but they kept quiet about it as they saw that we were reconciled. And we passed a pleasant evening together.

50.

Went to work. While they were calling out the news, they mentioned that City Parliament was considering whether or not to build an amusement transit line.

I had a discussion about this with my co-worker.

You know, she said, I'm all for having fun, but this seems like a waste of public funds. I would rather see each of us have a little bit more money to spend on our own amusements.

But, I rejoined, Consider this: who else could build an amusement transit line? If we're going to have one, it will have to be a public utility.

Yeah, I guess I just don't see it as being worthwhile, She said.

But, she continued, I guess if they vote it in, it could be fun to ride.

I agreed.

I came home and studied with Ray Ann, and after dinner I talked to Lanval.

He was having some problems in his relationship with Constance. Well, it seemed that "relationship" is not necessarily the word for it.

He told me that he wanted her real bad, that he wished he could just get her to love him. And I spoke just a little sharply in my reply.

No, I said, You just have to wait. You have to wait, and maybe you have to give up.

How will I know whether to wait or give up?

At first you won't know. But then you'll realize that you've been waiting far too long. Or you can give up before that point comes and wonder what might have been. But you always have to wait for other people to love you, once you've done your part.

But it's so *hard* to wait! I lie awake at night and I think of her smile, the things we *have* spoken about, and I can hear over and over what has been and I think over and over about what might be. It's so *hard*. It's the worst suffering I think I have ever experienced in my entire *life*. Does it get better when you get older?

No, not really. You feel the same way, but you just get better at feeling that way.

Oh man, he said, looking sad.

Hey, don't worry about it too much, I said. Life is brutal.

Ha, yeah! He said. Life is brutal.

After that I went down to the office to do some business, and then I went down to the common room, passing Milun and Yonec having a fun conversation.

There in the common room, I saw Elizabeth talking with one of the older women, not Jennifer, I didn't know this woman's name. I sat and talked with them for a little bit. It turns out that she immigrated from the old city many years ago. I told

her how things were now, and she told me how things were then.

Now, I'm on my way to bed.

51.

Woke up, ran some errands, then we went to the second-to-last episode of New City's Next Piece of Poop.

I was in a good mood all day. I saw all kinds of possibilities, and I think that perhaps I got a little bit too wound up. It isn't as though I said anything I regret now, as I write this down, but, as I write this down, I feel a kind of ache inside, a kind of hardened exhaustion, which is what I usually feel when I've had my limit of fun. It makes me think of the summer I worked for the carnival up in the old city, how the little kids would somehow stop having fun even though they had experienced nothing but fun that day.

Ray Ann was quiet, although she seemed to enjoy herself.

She has to start preparing more intensively for her case, which is coming up in about a week and a half.

She's on summer break from law starting this week, which is a lucky coincidence. She'll miss the first session of summer school to do this case, and then she'll take the next session.

We went home and had a nice dinner of sandwiches from Tony's deli. Then we got out some classic board games, like Dilemma and Dice And Compass, and played by the light of

Ray Ann's desk lamp and our flashlights a ways past our bedtimes.

52.

Today I woke up tired and early, and felt kind of out of it and irritable for much of the day. But as it got into the afternoon, I started to feel better. I don't think any of us did much, we mostly just hung around various rooms in the complex, and had slow-paced, low-key conversations.

53.

Went to work, it was normal, talked to my favorite co-worker a bit about New City's Next Piece of Poop. We were pretty excited about the finale. Who would be left at the end? Would they do a double-elimination?

Then I came home and studied with Ray Ann for a while. She talked about the medical procedure she had had that morning, which was to gather DNA from her unborn child for use in the paternity ruling. That way they could have the paternity ruling at the same time as the trial. She said that the procedure was invasive and uncomfortable, but definitely worth it if they could get the restraining order against Justin sooner. Justin wouldn't be required to leave our neighborhood until the child was born, but he might take the option to leave sooner if presented with the inevitability. He might take it out of the goodness of his heart, or out of a desire to move on in life, or out of a desire

to save face, appear gracious. Or, who could say what his motive might be under the circumstances?

After our speculations were ended, we resumed our reading, and then went to dinner and conversed until bedtime.

54.

Went to work, the usual, came home, Ray Ann was busy, so I read by myself. Had dinner, talked with the others. An uneventful day.

55.

Much like yesterday, just a ho-hum kind of day. Ray Ann still busy.

Yesterday I didn't miss her too much, but today I was feeling it. The feeling of missing her was just a little voice, like a little pain, speaking somewhere inside of me. It didn't say much, I didn't feel a passion of missing her. I felt a will to see her, a will to talk to her. But it was a quiet will, a dry will. It was quite mild and did not bother me too much. Yet it was there. I even enjoyed the feeling, I liked missing her, even though it was a bit painful. Perhaps there is a pleasure in missing someone, the pleasure of possessing something in the inner chambers, the pleasure of having a purpose or direction laid up inside. And as I cherished and deliberately experienced this feeling, then I began to be frustrated, but just a little bit.

She came late to dinner and I was glad to see her.

And we talked about whatever things we normally talked about, and played a game of Dilemma, and then it was time to go to bed.

56.

The next day I felt kind of bad in the morning, and then I went to work, and sorted recyclables, and talked to my favorite co-worker, and went home.

Ray Ann was still out preparing for her case, so I kicked it with the Funk Turtles. They told me they changed their name to just, The Turtles.

Yeah, we were down in Southern City and ran into Joe “Loving” Jackson, you know, the DJ for Funk 106.3.

Is that a big deal?

Where have you been? That’s THE funk station. Hands down.

Okay, so what did he say?

We told him about our band and about our band name and he said,

The Turtles. You gotta just be The Turtles.

And all four of us, then and there, just to hear him say it, realized that he was right, and that he had always been right. “Funk Turtles” just sounds dumb.

Well, I said. Now you know better.

Yeah. Well, it’s a good thing that we haven’t been playing live as the Funk Turtles, haven’t been doing any radio appearances. It’s simpler this way.

It’s always simpler when you’re not successful, I said.

Yeah, they said, We get that.

And we, or more accurately, they, had some more diverting conversation, and when I had my fill, I departed, in a good mood but still missing Ray Ann.

What is this? Am I in love with her? It’s possible, I suppose.

But perhaps I simply miss the groove we wore in the late afternoon and early evening. We sat together and read, and as we traveled forward in our books, we left a little impression in the time of day, which has become a groove.

But then, maybe by being around her so often, I’ve made a groove in myself, I made it out of the feeling of her being present beside me or across from me at that study table.

Will I know it when I’m in love with her? Do I even have to wait until I’m in love with her to pursue some kind of romantic relationship with her? Do I really want to become her husband AND the father of her child by Justin? Or do I

just want to sit beside her and study, week in, week out, for many, many years?

I don't know the answer to any of these questions, and, at this time of night, they just keep me up. But to get back to my day:

Ray Ann came to dinner on time, and I was glad to see her, as I was yesterday. And then we all had a nice conversation, and when we were tired, we went to our beds.

But here I am, still writing. But I suppose I should go to bed.

I wonder how Ray Ann feels about me. It seems to me that she could go either way, just as much as I could. And that's perfect, I guess. I think we're already together that way.

57.

Went to work, came home, and Ray Ann was there in the library, reading, not a law book, but a novel. I sat down and asked her what she was reading, and it got me so interested in the author that I looked around the shelves of the library and found another one of her books, a collection of essays, and sat there reading.

There's something about reading with another person, whether Ray Ann or whoever else I've done this with in my brief and random life, which somehow makes the words that you read have the presence of the other person give some of the voice of what you're reading. It's like, words are helpless

and inert, but they have power if you give them voice.

When you're by yourself, you have to provide them all of their voice. It takes energy and a certain initiative, to get the words off the page and up in your head. And then the words, with their potential energy, can roll down out of that place in your head and make something happen. In reality, books have no power, the reader has all the power. But, when you're reading with someone else, some of their presence enters into you and gives you some of the power to lift those words to the start of their rollercoaster ride.

It's really quite wonderful, because it costs nothing to broadcast your presence to the people around you, or more precisely to be present for them to take in your presence.

Anyhow, the essays were interesting, but Ray Ann eventually tired of the novel and ended up looking out the window. And then she got up, said she had something to do, and left the library.

And I felt fine.

And then we had the usual dinner fun, conversation, and a game of Dilemma. And now it's the end of the day. It's a day that I would be glad to repeat, in its essence, for a long time.

58.

Woke up, ran some errands.

The finale of New City's Next Piece of Poop. Amazing. The judges went into overtime. Double-elimination, \$25 each.

After the show, there was a cast party, open to whomever. All of the previous contestants were there. It was interesting to meet New City's poopiest people. They weren't how I expected them to be. They seemed too nice, too human, too charming. But then, they all had a kind of edge to them, a kind of meanness. I guess it all makes sense.

The judges had to go home pretty much right as the party began because they had to go to bed. The rest of us had a good time for about an hour and then caught the train home.

At home, we didn't feel like playing Dilemma, so instead we got out our dice and compasses and played Dice And Compass. I was enjoying these inventive Southern City games. After playing Dice And Compass, we had the beginnings of abstract art, and Elizabeth filled in some of the curves with her colored pencils.

59.

I went for the longest walk I've been on this whole time I've been in New City. I walked from early in the morning, when I wake up to go to work, and walked until after dark, using my flashlight. It was the best day I've had in New City.

I don't know what it was that possessed me to do this. I just felt like I had to walk. I went to all of the quarters although I didn't make it all the way down to Southern City. I sweated, and got tired. Salt formed on my skin, and I liked it. I sang to myself, quietly or loudly, depending on my circumstances. I walked down in the bottom of the ravine for a long ways and then made my way out of it. I thought about Ray Ann, of course, but also Elizabeth, Joanna, Tony, my co-worker, Lanval, Guigemar, Yonec, Milun, Constance, Jennifer. It is quite true that I thought the most about Ray Ann. But there was a lightness to me, to my experience.

The sun was hot and I stopped for water whenever I could. I ate out at a restaurant and packed the leftovers as my next meal-or-snack. I went up into towers to get a view, and I found several monuments and flagpoles. I stopped in an art museum for half an hour, and I gave some money to a street musician who sang beautifully.

I was out in my environment, that whole day, my legs getting tired and my feet hurting. It was just me and the world.

And tonight, having come back to my cocoon, the apartment complex, and having spoken with my friends about some of the things I saw, I settle back in this chair and I don't have much to write. I would wonder if this day means something.

Does it mean that I will always be alone, I will always wander? Or does it mean nothing?

This walk made me happier than any of my thoughts about Ray Ann, any of my experiences with her. Does this mean that I should walk, rather than be with her? I don't know.

Maybe it means that. But maybe, it means nothing. It was just today.

It felt good to take a shower after that long, hot day. I'm hungry, so I think I'll have some bread with hummus, and then go to sleep.

60.

Woke up sore, went to work, did my job, it was fine, caught the train, came back home, and, as Ray Ann's trial was starting in two days, she was out preparing for it. I felt fine, happy without her, though I would have been happy had she been with me.

Ray Ann was late to dinner, and I was glad to see her, but it wasn't like before. It was a different kind of gladness. She looked tired, and I asked her about the process of preparing for the case. She had to go over her testimony. Her lawyer was coaching her in how to be confident, project the right air, stay firm when cross-examined. She wished that she could have had more time with him, but he was busy in the mornings and early afternoon. But she was beginning to feel more confident.

Ray Ann, said Joanna, Have you seen Justin recently?

No, she said. I take the long way to avoid going by his apartment building.

I can't imagine how unsafe you must feel. she said. I hope they make him move.

We'll see, said Ray Ann. I think he will.

She spoke simply, sadly, gravely. She didn't speak with "on-ness", nor "of-courseness" nor triumph.

How is it that the topic of Ray Ann's rape and of Justin and all that had slipped our minds? It's strange, even somehow it had slipped mine, even though we did talk about it quite a bit when we were studying. I think Ray Ann herself, though she couldn't stop thinking about it, tired of it, and did not speak of it. Oh well, that's the way life is. You move on.

After dinner, not much of note happened.

61.

Went to work, feeling a little bit of suspense about Ray Ann's trial, which was tomorrow. Talked to my co-worker about it, and she said,

That must be really intense. I can't even imagine being attacked and lied about in front of other people. That must be really hard. I hope she is very fortunate.

I thanked her for her words and told her that I would relay them to Ray Ann, which I did when I got home and saw her going over her notes.

I probably shouldn't be cramming, but I've crammed for every other test I've taken in my life. she said with a tired and halfway smile.

Do you think this trial will prepare you to be a lawyer? The experience of being a witness, of keeping your story straight?

I'm sure. Maybe someday it will help me.

I know I don't always keep my story straight under pressure.

Well, may you never have your life depend on it, then! She laughed, and so did I.

—

I tried going to sleep, but I couldn't, and there's not much more to write about today in my diary, so I've just been doodling simple patterns in my diary, and realizing that I don't have very many pages left in it. Oddly enough, I think I may just have enough to get through tomorrow or a day after that. How nice that life lines up like that. I'm sure tomorrow or the next day will be a good stopping place.

We'll see though, maybe it won't. I certainly want to see how Ray Ann's fate is decided: will she get to give up her child? Will she have to keep her child? Will she become a lawyer? Will she become a mother? I want to know how tomorrow turns out.

Nothing interesting happened until, after I got home, Ray Ann arrived, and we all listened to her talk about her day over dinner.

I don't have much to say, she said, I'm drained. Justin looked sharp and talked sharp, very humble man, spoke simply and sincerely, calmly, purely, but of course everything he said was a lie. And when I spoke, I started out calm but then became emotional, even though I knew that could hurt my case, because I started to mix up in my head what I was supposed to say. And Justin's lawyer was horrible. That man is a shark in human flesh. But a smart, evil shark. Real sharks are fine by me.

We laughed, and she went on.

No, I think all I succeeded in doing is showing the jury and judge that I do NOT trust Justin. You know when you're faced with people like him, how you don't have any words?

Some of us knew how that was.

That's how it was. Well, I think our testimony will be over tomorrow and then the jury will decide the criminal case and then we can have the paternity ruling. I don't think my chances are too good to convict him, but I'm game. I'm glad that guy has to sweat. My lawyer is a lion.

Oh well, she said. I don't want to go into any more details right now. Let's talk about something else.

So we further discussed excuses to spend time with my co-worker.

And I have been in just as much suspense as yesterday, even more.

I wonder if this suspense is entirely real. Do I really care about Ray Ann? Or do I think I'm supposed to? Is this all built-up? Or maybe because I care about her, I build up the suspense. Or maybe the suspense is real.

I'm certainly going to have a hard time sleeping tonight.

63.

I went to work pretty tired, but also under suspense. I got through a long day, and came home to the library, and Ray Ann was already there, the whole proceedings having ended on the early side.

So what happened?

So, the short version of the story is, Justin's guilt was ruled Not Proved, and in the paternity ruling, the judge determined that given the testimony in the case (it was really hard, Paul, I could barely talk sometimes), and the huge discrepancy in what we were saying and what that all implied, that for the sake of the child, he had to stay out of our quarter, have no contact, etc, until our child turns 18.

So, just about the best we could have reasonably expected. And so, she continued, It looks like I'm going to be a mother.

And one of these days I'll have to decide who's going to be my child's legal father. The man who can be a father to my child. It's a long commitment. I might choose you. You've been good to me. But I might choose Tony. He seems like he would make a good father too. We'll see.

And we smiled, and we were both moved, (I could tell she was because of the moistness in her eyes), and then we just looked out the window into the courtyard, where Guigemar seemed to be hanging around Constance, for reasons we could not fathom.

And then we talked about whatever else there was to talk about, we didn't touch any books, that evening in the library, and then we went to dinner and she told of her day, with the others. And then, we were all relieved, although, in fact, justice had not been served, but we were still relieved, and thought we should celebrate. So we went out in the courtyard and got out the firepit, and we needed something to burn so finally I asked the Turtles if they had any old school papers to burn, and that idea excited them, and we burned the school papers and had a good time.

And eventually, we all went to bed, except me. And I'm cramming this all on the very last page.